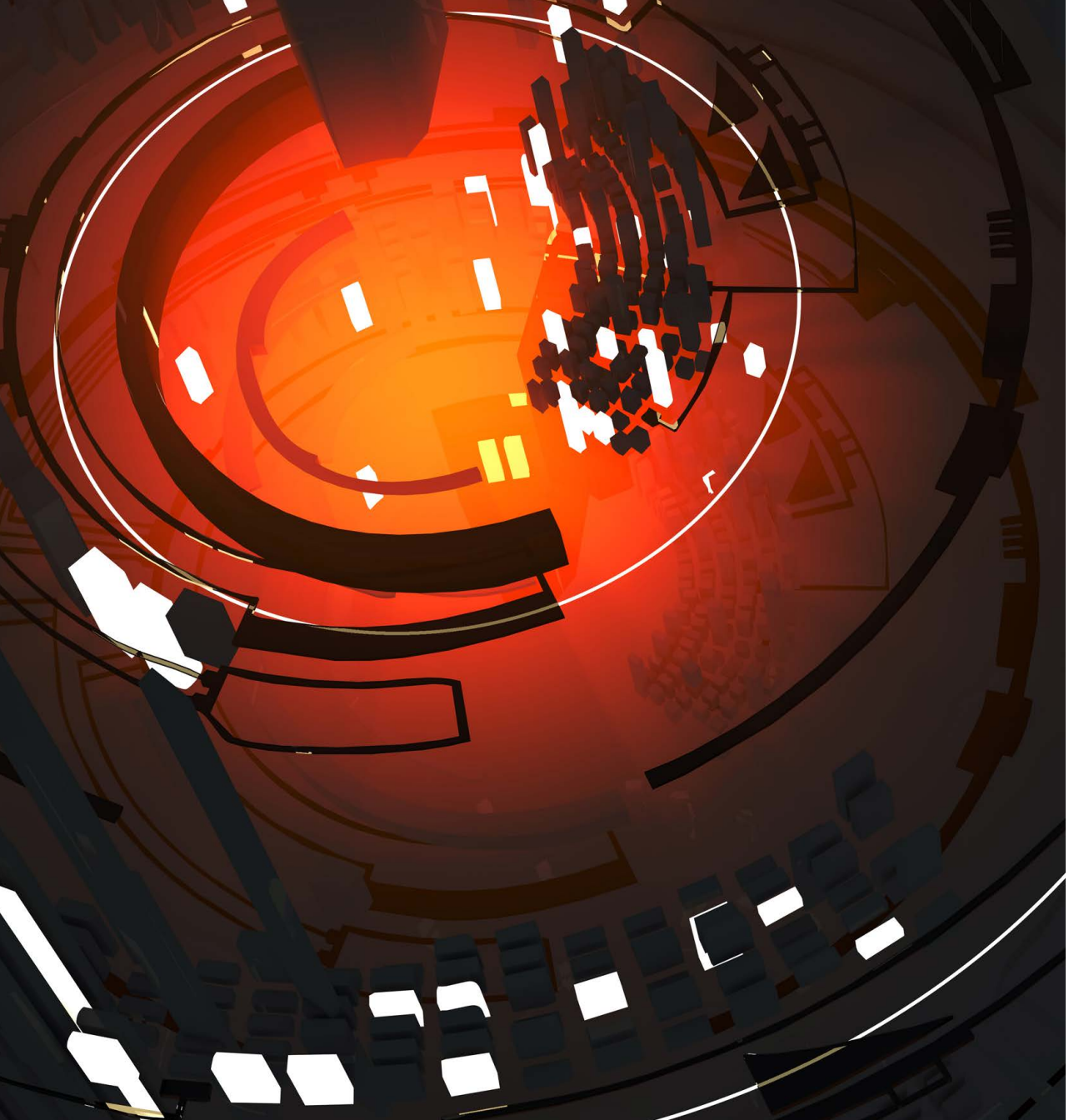
V.E.R.S.I.O.N.

2063.05--CC-CCT.01

Simulated Cognitive Compatibility Assessment

VIRTUAL EVALUATION OF RESPONSE SIMILARITIES IN ORGANIC NETWORKS

COALESCENCE
CORPORATION



COALESCENCE
CORPORATION

V.E.R.S.I.O.N.

2063.05--CC-CCT.01

Simulated Cognitive Compatibility Assessment

Submitted to: Corporate Communications Team

Previous Employee Baseline: Gurmit [redacted]

Candidate: Bastien [redacted]

VIRTUAL
EVALUATION OF
RESPONSE
SIMILARITIES
IN
ORGANIC
NETWORKS

CALL OF DUTY
BLACK OPS III

ACTIVISION

treyarch

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

This book is associated with Call of Duty: Black Ops 3, which is Rating Pending.

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VIRTUAL **E**VALUATION OF **R**ESPONSE **S**IMILARITIES **I**N **O**RGANIC **N**ETWORKS

1
::MODULE_1.0//:INITIALIZING

::LOADING//:CANDIDATE_COMPARISON:MODULE:1.1
::ASSIGN.FRAME.A//:BASTIEN_2063.DB...SUCCESSFUL
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ZURICH

Welcome to Turicum, opening night, list-and-augs only.

Don't worry, I'm on the list.

Also on three different aug lists, but those are *way* pricier than bottle-service.

Mitzi's talking. Because she's always talking. My little sister, Mitzi-the-Wiki, boosted her cog capacities a month ago and might have the whole fucking internet in her head. Says "Turicum" was Zurich's maiden name, our town's title back when we still spoke Latin and served as a Roman tax outpost. Now it's the name of the nightclub we find ourselves in queue for, the promoters who fled Singapore after You-Know-What having named their shiny new temple to excess in honor of Zurich's empiric origins.

At long last, the time of togas has returned.

Now Mitzi's sharing an opinion. Because she's always sharing her opinion. Nods at the newest, largest, gaudiest dance scene in the world and says Turicum, as far as names go, nailed Zurich from the onset.

Still a proud and mighty tax outpost.

"Do you ever shut up?"

But before she can, we are inside.

Turicum is a time machine to ancient Rome, it's Rome, realized—their every extravagance modernized, with infinity pool "bathhouses" to the left and a bona fide dining "floor" to the right, where Zurich's wealthiest lie down to feast, leave discards on the ground for staff to clean up. Erase and re-write the barbarians, the end of Roman patriotism, a gap between rich and poor so wide the empire rotted on the vine and you'd find this, Roma 2063: the world's prettiest and ritziest, tray-passed golden goblets of cloned Pinot Noir, flirty conversation amongst holographic busts of ancient emperors. Sexual and political deviance delivered hand-in-hand, hand-in-pocket, hand-on-ass. The main dance floor—what some ivy-crowned bouncer grandly introduces as the *Amphitheater*—appears surrounded by a forest of forged glass columns masquerading as facades of exquisitely-carved, semi-transparent granite, and squeezing between them and the pretty people are waitresses whose togas are painted on with luminescent bodylight. From our table, Mitzi waves one over and we watch, stunned, as the server's

toga changes colors in time with the lighting beneath her feet, and then shifts to the walls beside her, and then matches the color of the drinks she hands us.

Mitzi grabs two, toasts them into each other, chugs both. The drinks' green lights go red.

She hands me my own pair. Winks.

This is how our celebration begins. Tomorrow I begin my new job at Coalescence Corporation and Mitzi my know-it-all nailed it. We're in the right place to get very, very weird.

"Four more," Mitzi says, "and the first bottle." The waitress glides back to the bar for reinforcements.

"Can you really handle that?" I ask.

"Telling me to drink like a lady?"

"No. But. You know. It's going to be a long night."

I suddenly understand how my sister can drink like a turn-of-the-century traveling salesman.

"You jacked up your liver and kidneys didn't you?"

Mitzi gives a grin I know from our childhood. She waves toward the teeming crowd.

"Hope you can keep up."

It's a tall order. All around us, synthetic marble walls in aug'd abs as hard as marble, and that's just entry-level augmentation. Mind, body, spirit: they're all for purchase, and it's clear almost everyone in here has padded my new employer's profit margins considerably. Easing restrictions on gene therapy and ever-shrinking implantables allowed Coalescence Corporation and

its competitors to begin rolling out augmentation for the masses about ten years ago. In Singapore at first, and in Zurich now, the installation of an aug is a sign of having made it. Whereas the rest of the world is fighting food shortages, folks like the ones here fight boredom, stasis. Money unspent is money wasted, and money unspent on oneself is *potential* wasted.

Another waitress arrives with our drinks, her tray of green parting a trail through the revelers. Before she can even mix the drinks, Mitzi's already pouring neat and heavy. The waitress turns to me instead.

"You're the Coalescence guy, right? I bet you get the best perks, don't you?"

Her voice cuts through the bass and treble like we're talking in a library. She must have had vocal work done just for this job.

"I might. Start tomorrow."

I see Mitzi roll her eyes.

Five shots go red at another table, cutting short our moment. The waitress pinches my arm on her walk away, bodylight cycling between white sheen toga, leopard skin, lingerie. A treat meant just for me.

Mitzi's eyes confirm she's judging. Because Mitzi's always judging.

"Bastien. That thing you think is a girl will leech you of all your in-house discounts, then take her augs up the ladder."

She's right, of course. Turicum tonight is a showroom for today's most eligible human specimens, which also makes it a

showroom for credit-hoarding augstitutes. Whereas the club itself has embraced a Roman taste for extravagant titles—we with tables are dubbed Emperors, Senators dance in balcony pods above the Amphitheater, and the DJ, our deity, faces every angle of the dance floor, spinning upon his platform like the great extinct Greek God of Vinyl—its attendees have long-since embraced another of Rome's themes: *worship*. For those flush with cash, the human body has become a holy endeavor, and like any self-respecting religion, that kind of devotion demands tribute.

Mitzi slinks onto the dance floor with her big brain and even bigger alcohol tolerance, blending into a throng of human-gods, their teeth enamel augmented to not turn red after that cloned pinot, or brown after a nightcap of New Nile Arabica; armpits that will never again grow hair or sweat anything odorous; fingernails perfectly shaped and permanently painted, with insta-swappable colors for when pantone-inspiration strikes; hair augmented to stay straightened or curled or never grow at all; eyes that see as well in the dark as in the day, eyes that glow red with their owner's arousal; standard augs of Olympian musculature, hand-model fingers, cheekbones so plump they could pop.

Then there's what I can't see: short-and-long term memory expansions, mood enhancers and stabilizers, the eradication of social anxieties, food-and-drink allergies, even smoker's cough.

And then there's the shit I hope to never see: bio-hackers hawking stolen DNA, an ex-girlfriend who's revised whatever turned me off, and anyone at the urinal dumb enough to aug their hog.

These are my people, my new peers.

And tomorrow, they become my customers.

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SINGAPORE

At three in the morning, riding the city's new monorail feels like passing through REM cycles, a dream-like dart from one Singapore neighborhood to the next. Whole blocks blur, allowing few distinct visuals so that when I arrive at work, I won't recall any one memory—just the sense I went somewhere. And that now I've arrived.

Sleepy or not, I'll know when I do. The Isle has that effect.

Until then, I witness my city whiz by with the same velocity that transformed it over the last fifteen years. While today in Thailand, millions of refugees escape incessant flooding by foot, we zip around on a brand-new, aboveground monorail, built last year to crisscross all the way north and south from HarbourFront to the Straits of Johor. The monorail connects an upstart, shiny-new Singapore: dozens of state-of-the-art schools, factories, hospitals, even a new soccer stadium with its *own* hospital.

The rest of the world isn't enjoying the same growth spurt. In search of their own stability, they feed us billions in foreign military research, dozens of allies and enemies now using us as their common denominator. The resulting influx of GDP has multiplied the number of towers that pierce our skyline tenfold, with the city's population not far behind. On the train this evening, I see the buildings stand high above Singapore's tech bazaars, shrunk down along with the devices they once hawked, yet still busy at this late hour. Even fashion, the one industry ripest for 3D-printer counterfeit, has remained a constant vein of green, pumping enough new money through Orchard Road's world-famous stretch of luxury goods that it's sprouted whole new tributaries of coffee shops, jazz clubs, VR-cafes—a veritable orchard now, where bloated consumers graze down row after bountiful row. Sure, some of Singapore's constants remain: no gum, murder-for-murder, the strobes and soju of Geylang. But the kids there, like their parents, still party through every sunrise, rivals only to the insomniac beasts of the Night Safari Nocturnal Zoo—my last visual cue before we pull past the city's BioDome and Garden—before I finally, fantastically arrive for work.

The Isle.

No transformation or accomplishment is more important than Singapore's seascraper, floating off shore, as self-sufficient as

she is sultry. Fifteen hundred feet of maritime miracle.

Composed of luxury residences, commercial offices, and recreational areas, the floating island of a city is Singapore's answer to a world in unrest asking what the future can look forward to—but also what the present can do about withering urban shorelines and a crippling energy shortage.

Our island-nation's answer? Gain independence from both.

The Isle foregoes land and oil altogether, completely self-sufficient thanks to a photovoltaic skin above water and deep sea turbines down below. The solar throughput is enough for our superficial needs—wireless charging, exterior lighting—but it's the turbines that tackle our main life-support and operational demands, harnessing and harvesting slow, super-dense ocean currents for energy. At the turbines' depths, water is eight-hundred times more dense than anything a windmill can capture, which means most months we have enough to spare that we could sell it back into the grid. Instead, The Isle stores it for a rainy day while powering a desalination plant in its lower core. That fresh water pumps into steam baths, saunas, and cucumber waters at the fitness center; it's frozen into ice and carbonated, accompanying happy-hour gins and vodkas; it floats by, bubbles up, or shoots into the air at any one of two dozen fountains, waterfalls, and reflection ponds; it flows like the river in hands of hold-em played at the The Isle's high-roller's casino, a perfect nightcap for days spent in the salon or shopping mall or either one of our Michelin-starred restaurants. At The Isle,

guests hit golf balls off one side and watch movies on the other; they jog 5Ks through clouds, then scuba through undersea depths. They enjoy the sundeck and infinity pool up top, retreat to five-star penthouse accommodations below. They toast their wives or taste their mistresses. The Isle is an offshore haven for those with the kinds of offshore accounts that don't know how to separate business and pleasure, because their business *is* pleasure.

They are my people, if not my peers.

And tonight, they will be my customers.

"Gurmit!"

It's never good when I hear the earpiece from *inside* my pocket. That Lim's yelling my name through comms *that* loudly. It's that rare volume achieved when I'm confirmed as doing something very wrong, which tonight, could be just about anything. I'm not supposed to be here, let alone watching this, let alone with my earpiece commingling with an illegal gum wrapper. Telling you: just about *anything*.

I scramble to push the earpiece back in.

"Sir! Sir?"

The wireless bud is so quiet I wonder if my squeeze accidentally triggered a reboot.

In the silence, my eyes return to the v-pitch below. Still standing at centerfield is JJ—yes, just JJ—the pride of Singapore's

national soccer team and top-priority Isle Lofts guest, which is where The Isle's most high-profile guests go for five-star shuteye. We're currently across the compound from the Lofts, where we're both supposed to be—he asleep, resting those precious feet, and me monitoring room temperatures and humidity, prepping the morning shift check-outs, queuing up our small army of in-room breakfast chefs. Alas, someone far more important than anyone I report to has granted JJ absolute exclusivity to privately train with The Isle's facilities for next month's championship series, so we both find ourselves here, our proprietary v-pitch. He came in through the front in sandals, cleats strung up around his neck, as I snuck through the back service entrance, watching from shadowed balcony seating far enough for him not to notice. It's moments like these my RFID for all things Lofts-level is my best perk, besides of course the freedom of working when everyone else is sleeping.

Everyone but JJ, I've learned.

He stands at centerfield in total silence and completely alone, like every other 4 a.m. this week. VR-goggles and his own earpiece ensure I blend in with the rest of a raucous, roaring crowd, but he'd have disregarded me anyway. It's him versus the projection of a goalie standing sentry. Binary-enhanced tunnel vision. Go time.

"Lim?" I ask. "You there?"

From what I understand, they can now code all of an athlete's moves and ticks, his every hesitation and instinct. Then the magic pixie dust: they use AI to extrapolate decision-making probabilities based on previous decisions and stats. The result is a

precise scout-sim output that coaches and players can VR-practice against.

JJ positions himself behind the ball for a free kick, stepping back once, twice—pivoting, then stepping back and turning. A swift approach and kick sends JJ's ball off the grass he sees through the goggles' transparent HUD. Depending on if he looks up now to follow his shot or traces its arc later, he'll transition from our field's artificial grass to the v-pitch's lowest range—field-level advertisements, the shins of cameramen and opposing coaches—until he's only viewing the feed of a 120 frames per second sim of his upcoming match: superimposed layers of atmospherics, stadium lighting, flashing cameras, that monster of a Greek goalie.

The one disappointment is that the Greek appears in JJ's display only, so I can't ever know if he scores or not. JJ, a human, is too robotic to guess at, anyway. He just sets up and shoots. Again and again.

My earbud crackles to life.

"Gurmit! Where the fuck are you?"

"On my way back to the front desk," I lie.

"Your GPS isn't triangulating!"

"It should be."

"I need you at the desk now!"

"I'm already on my way."

My boss, Lim, does this often. Sometimes I think it's strictly to annoy me, but that would demand Lim's brain to operate at a capacity rivaling the inflated ball rolling back toward JJ for more abuse.

I backtrack through the pitch's viewing balcony and enter the main thoroughfare outside. Thanks to two-dozen stacked transparent walkways that connect the higher-levels of The Isle, I can see almost everything at once. Who's coming out of the fitness center, the late-night buffet, the private screening room. Tonight, it's silent. It gets more refracted the farther you look, one glass tunnel bouncing off the next, so what I think I see at first, I tell myself I cannot be seeing.

But then I *hear* it.

Not through my earbud, which has again gone quiet. In front of me. In the distance. Coming closer. Fast.

Every corner turned and new tunnel entered brings whatever is screaming and sprinting toward the far side of the Lofts closer to me.

Lim explodes into my ear. "Stop her! Stop her!"

"Who?"

"Running — toward — you — female — Caucasian — mid-fifties!"

It's up to me. I approach the tunnel the sprinter will come out from next, wondering all the way why a fifty-year-old woman is running through one of the finest hotels in the world. I assume it's a bad trip, a cocktail of meds gone wrong.

"Turning the corner," I report. "Got her."

There's just one glass tunnel left between us and I see my prey clearer than ever. She's thin. American-thin. Long blonde hair and a baggy sweatshirt above something tighter, maybe yoga pants.

She sounds like whatever someone about to be murdered sounds like. A fierce, angry dread.

She turns the last tunnel and does not appear to slow down upon seeing me, arms outstretched, blocking the bulk of the passageway. Instead, she speeds up.

"Stop!"

Her fists piston up and down like she's done this sprint-at-top-velocity thing before. A track star or maybe a HIIT junky. Your average American housewife professionally training for nothing.

"STOP!" I scream.

She's twenty feet away when she looks up and screams. Whatever she sees, I don't. But whatever she sees is real to her, and with seemingly the same clarity that JJ did on the v-pitch. She turns back around and ten feet away now, looks through me, no different than the glass tunnels I peered through in pursuit of her. To her, I don't exist. Maybe none of this does.

The drones! is the last thing she screams.

I form tackle her, low to high, stopping her with a shoulder into her waist the way a seatbelt might. I feel the air explode out of her lungs and wait for her to start coughing, but on the ground below me, she stays oddly still. Her eyes water. She stares up through the top of The Isle at a black morning sky still defrosting, our ember of a star rising, still too far for the other clouds to catch. The woman begins to whimper like a child.

Then she starts screaming again, her panicked mantra filling the hall.

The drones. The drones. The drones.

"Lim, you see my position?"

"On — my — way!"

I turn back to the American.

"What drones?"

She doesn't stop repeating it, victim to some kind of panic attack, maybe a full-blown hallucination.

The drones. The drones.

"You're okay. I promise you're fine. No drones. None here."

Suddenly a voice behind me—a deep baritone, deeply annoyed.

"I got it," the man in the pinstripe suit says, stabbing the woman's neck with a triggered syringe.

The woman convulses once, twice, and then begins snoring loud enough to make the man in the suit laugh.

"They always black out so quick," he says, still chuckling.

"The hell?"

"Appreciate your help," he answers. "She was having a severe panic attack. PTSD. Survived the Los Angeles drone attacks."

I recall the throng of LA-based tourists who came two days ago. All with addresses in the Palisades and bank accounts healthy enough to allow victims of war to make the quick pivot to vacation. I don't remember her specifically, but there were dozens. All assigned to one block of rooms.

"Are you her husband?" I ask.

"I'm treating her."

"You the one who set up the block of rooms? For all the LA guests?"

"They're all on the Axcentric account."

Axcentric Systems has its headquarters here in The Isle. They're a charter member with the kind of uninhibited access through the building that makes my RFID-tag look like a charm bracelet.

Lim finally arrives, all 115 kilos of him. It looks like he swam in the koi pond and then sat in the steam room. I wonder if this guy in the suit has another sedative to calm the look in my boss's frantic eyes.

"You *killed* her?"

The man and I look at each other and he gives another of those chuckles.

"No, Lim," I answer. "Do you not hear that snoring?"

He might not, his wheezing and all.

"I'm her doctor," interrupts the man, checking her pulse. "She's fine."

"She's okay?" Lim asks, incredulous. "She sprinted by my front desk in hysterics."

"She's fine now. She had an episode. I'm going to take her back to where we're treating her, and I'd appreciate your wiping this hall's security feeds. Guests of her stature demand...discretion."

Lim's eyes again—less frantic this time than offended.

"I'm going to need to see some sort of—"

"Lim," I say sternly. "I ID'd him."

Those eyes know I didn't.

"No harm in double checking."

"Lim. They're good to go."

The man gives me a wink Lim doesn't catch—poor Lim, can't catch anything—grunting as he hoists the woman up and over his shoulder. We watch them walk back down the hall, drool leaking out of her mouth, tracing between pinstripes.

I'll tell Lim later that the guy wasn't a doctor. That he didn't want anything to do with this, or the paperwork that would follow it. That I saved his huge ass.

But when I turn back to Lim, he's looking at me like I caused the whole scene.

"What is it?"

"Are you..." Lim asks, tilting his head, "are you chewing *gum*?"

For the briefest of moments, I'm fucked, but just the briefest because then there's JJ, Singapore's hero, now mine, approaching us from down the hall with a gym bag sashed across his shoulders and VR-goggles tethered tight. Lim and I hug the sides of the glass hallway. We make room for the king of kicks as he toes down the middle of the hall. At first, we think the hall's newest mantra is meant for us—*Thank you, thanks very much, I love you too*—but the words are for nobody in particular, just as we are nobody in particular. Oblivious, JJ passes between us signing invisible autographs for a legion of adoring, virtual fans.

Spellbound, Lim never sees me turn away. He never sees me swallow my gum.

::LOADING//:CANDIDATE_COMPARISON:MODULE:1.3
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BASTIEN_2063

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GURMIT_2037

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SIM_TYPE
- ACTIVE_SIM
- ARCHIVAL_SIM
- COMPATIBILITY_MATRIX

COMPATIBILITY_RESULTS
- RESULT_CODE
- RESULT_DESCRIPTION

TIMEPERIODS
- 2037_ID
- 2063_ID

COMPATIBILITY_VARIABLEMATRIX
- VARIABLE_ID
- REACTIONTIME_SIM
- EMPATH_SIM
- EXTRO_SIM
- INTRO_SIM
- SENSE_SIM
- INTUIT_SIM
- THINK_SIM
- FEEL_SIM
- JUDGE_SIM
- PERCEIVE_SIM

SIMULATION_ELEMENTS
- PLACE_SIM
- FACE_SIM
- OPTIC_SIM
- COCHLEAR_SIM
- OLFACTORY_SIM
- GUSTATORY_SIM
- MEMORY_SIM
- ITEMS_SIM
- TACTILE_SIM

SIMSTREAM
- SIMSTREAM_ID
- NAME
- EMPOLOYEE_ID
- SIZE_BYTES
- DESCRIPTION
- USER_FORMAT_DESCRPTION
- SOURCE
- INTERNAL_ID
- DELETED
- STORE_NUMBER

SIM2SIM
- ID
- CANDIDATE_COMM_ID
- PRECEDING_COMM_ID

CC_HR
- OFFICE_ID
- NAME
- DEPT
- SALARY
- EXPERIENCE
- EDUCATION
- MANAGER

SIMMETADATAREGISTRY
- SIM_METADATA_ID
- CATEGORY
- SUBTEXT_QUALIFIER
- SECONDARY_QUALIFIER

SIMULATION_BASTIEN_VISUALS
- ROME
- TOGAS
- BODYLIGHT
- SINGAPORE_INCIDENT
- ETRAM
- AUGS_VARIOUS
- DRONES_VARIOUS
- AXION_LOGOASSET

INCOMPLETE

SIMULATION_BASTIEN_LOCATIONS
- TURICUM
- ZURICH
- INDUSTRIEQUARTIER
- HARDBRÜCKE
- ONE
- WAR_ROOM
- AX_SUB_BASEMENT_1

INCOMPLETE

SIMULATION_BASTIEN_PEOPLE
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- TURICUM_PATRONS_1-459
- JULIEN
- COMMAFFAIRS_TEAM_2-8
- VAST
- NIKLAS
- LUNG_BOOST_VICTIM
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INCOMPLETE

SIMULATION_BASTIEN_SOUND
- TURICUM
- SOUNDPROOF1_MEMBRANE
- SOUNDPROOF2_FIELD
- WAR_ROOM-FILES-1-4

INCOMPLETE

SIMULATION_BASTIEN_SCENT
- TURICUM-INTERIOR
- LAVENDER
- NEW_NILE-ARABICA
- ZURICH-VARIOUS

INCOMPLETE

SIMULATION_BASTIEN_ITEMS
- TRAIN
- FLYDRONE
- GLOVE-LATEX
- CC_KIT
- AX_HELMET

INCOMPLETE

SIMULATION_BASTIEN_RECALLS
- CC_OFFERINGS
- CC_AUG-BLACKMARKET
- CC_ZURICH-VARIOUS
- SUPERSTORM_DAISY

INCOMPLETE

::CANDIDATE_ASSESMENT_LOADED

::RENDER_UNDERWAY

SIMULATION_GURMIT_VISUALS
- V-PITCH
- D.E.A.D. SYSTEM
- L.A. DRONE ATTACK

INCOMPLETE

SIMULATION_GURMIT_LOCATIONS
- SINGAPORE
- MONORAIL
- THE ISLE
- THE LOFTS
- 104

INCOMPLETE

SIMULATION_GURMIT_PEOPLE
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- JJ
- CHRISTIAN
- MOTHER
- ADNAN
- SIM-PATIENTS1-13

INCOMPLETE

SIMULATION_GURMIT_SOUND
- L.A. DRONE ATTACK
- EGG TIMER

INCOMPLETE

SIMULATION_GURMIT_SCENT
- TOAST
- KAYA

INCOMPLETE

SIMULATION_GURMIT_RECALLS
- KAYA_BREAKFAST
- L.A. DRONE ATTACK
- 54_IMMORTALS

INCOMPLETE

SIMULATION_GURMIT_ITEMS
- V_PITCH
- EARPLUGS
- VR_GOGGLES
- MED_APPARATUS
- RFID_TAGS
- AX_HELMET

INCOMPLETE

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::ACTIVE_SIM//:GURMIT_2037

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ZURICH

At first, it feels just like Turicum. Seven doubles in, seeing double. That sense of being there and not, and then your dinner coming up and out.

But I don't vomit. The six-year old in front of me does. I know I'm dreaming so the boy with the blood coming out of his eyes shouldn't scare me. My breathing doesn't need to heave like his. It's up to me, I know he's not real, so when he vomits again and a coagulated mess of red and purple hits the ground; when he falls down and his little hand leaves a palm print in his own insides, I tell myself to stop. Get it together. Get out.

It's enough to turn me around, transport me back across Singapore, quiet as Chernobyl and just as deluded,

just as full of death. City officials told everyone to stay inside so there are the boy's dead parents, still holding each other in bed, windows shut, dust masks kissing. The cocktail of chemicals in the atmosphere was different here than on the block where it hit the boy. Air is more yellow than green, more Rhenium than Neodymium. The parents got theirs peaceful—coughing and suffocation, but at least some awareness. Enough time to lie down, embrace, stop breathing as one. To give a thought to who I come back to now, their boy, blinded by the blood, calling through red for help, for mommy, for nothing when it overcomes. His skin begins to singe from the inside out. Another school down the block will come down with tummy aches but the wrong breeze means this boy will receive more toxins than air. It means before he's even passed, alone in his sandbox, his skin will begin to scab and scale, ghostly white flakes that will fall, delicate as he, with final breaths.

I wake up screaming.

Then cussing, because this nightmare is my own goddamn fault. Coverage of the three-year anniversary of the "Singapore Disaster" is playing on the bedroom display. It was probably playing all night, infecting me from the moment I stumbled home and blacked out.

I rub my eyes and sleepwalk into the shower. I take punishment from the hottest water I can bear. I get dressed. I head to work. I ignore the newscasters who debate whether Coalescence Corporation paid the right price for their role in the most lethal chemical leak in history.

If I want to know that, I can ask them when I get there.

Besides the herds of hybrid-bicycles, cheating up and down inclines on battery-powered pedals, Zurich is connected by a reliable labyrinth of trains, trams, buses and boats. Long before we begin work at our desks, shoulders hunched, we travel shoulder-to-shoulder, packing into train cars that push carefully calculated ETAs into our daily calendars so that nary a second is lost. The Swiss Way! Today I'm especially grateful for that ping and haptic vibrato, as this'll be my first day in the Corporate Communications department at Coalescence, and I'm still one train and a transfer away; because, hungover as I am, it'd be stupid not to take every advantage Zurich has to offer — like air.

With no superstorms to worry about, Zurich's green lungs have blossomed, no longer limited to the vast forests from Adlisberg to Zürichberg. New city bylaws have planted trees and gardens atop most buildings, painting the city in splotches of intermittent green dots like an impressionist portrait. My neighborhood in west Zurich, Industriequartier, the city's former industrial area, has enjoyed not only the greatest transformation, but also the deepest infusion of green. With so much new development, we've seen "sprouting" at its most innovative. Prime Tower might have been the first superscraper, but now there are half-a-dozen, and the newest ones rotate outside panels of vegetation east-to-west with

the sun. All that city-mandated sprouting was just the start. Gone are Industriequartier's choking smokestacks, toxic runoff, worn-out timecards. Now we boast puffs of recycled air, spools of optic fiber and workers like me, always on, but paid handsomely. The Westside factories that once specialized in outputting sheets and bottles of glass have been replaced by enormous structures composed of just that—towering see-through specters of solar-absorbent compounds that remind me of the transparent columns back at Turicum, except teeming with transactions, not togas.

I take another deep breath and it's a lungful of Zurich's finest that does it.

For a moment I'm no longer heading for the 7:48a at Hardbrücke, or dropping Mitzi at her pad, but back with the boy, his parents. Sand and skin. The visions of Singapore from my nightmare and the newsfeed this morning arrive swiftly and I attempt to swallow them down, no different from the other nausea I woke up with.

I try to focus on the intersection—all its blinking reds. On the trolley that's coming.

I'm grateful for the interruption suddenly buzzing in my pocket—a wave and crash of haptic updates that flows through my pocket and every other pedestrian's in the immediate area. Sometimes these beacons warn of global disaster. A little ping portending some massive new catastrophe: the worsening water shortage in Cairo, some new crumbling economy or alliance, the insanity of our global technological arms race, even as food aid

goes hand to mouth. The world outside of Zurich is in unstable shambles—yet even with all our connectedness, it still feels a world away.

This time, at least, the update's just a train schedule. One by one, my fellow pedestrians and I learn if we've lost precious seconds or whole minutes.

Time is fast like that. Go back just a few years and all this was theirs—Zurich wasn't the world's brightest beacon, Singapore was. It's there where Coalescence Corporation got started on consumer augmentation—it's there where almost *every* technology and advancement we take for granted got started. Enterprise, consumer, military: every week some new Singapore announcement sent companies and whole countries scrambling to invest, invest, invest. They built a research bed unlike any other in history thanks to a government that made our friendly tax laws look downright dystopian.

The Incident changed everything.

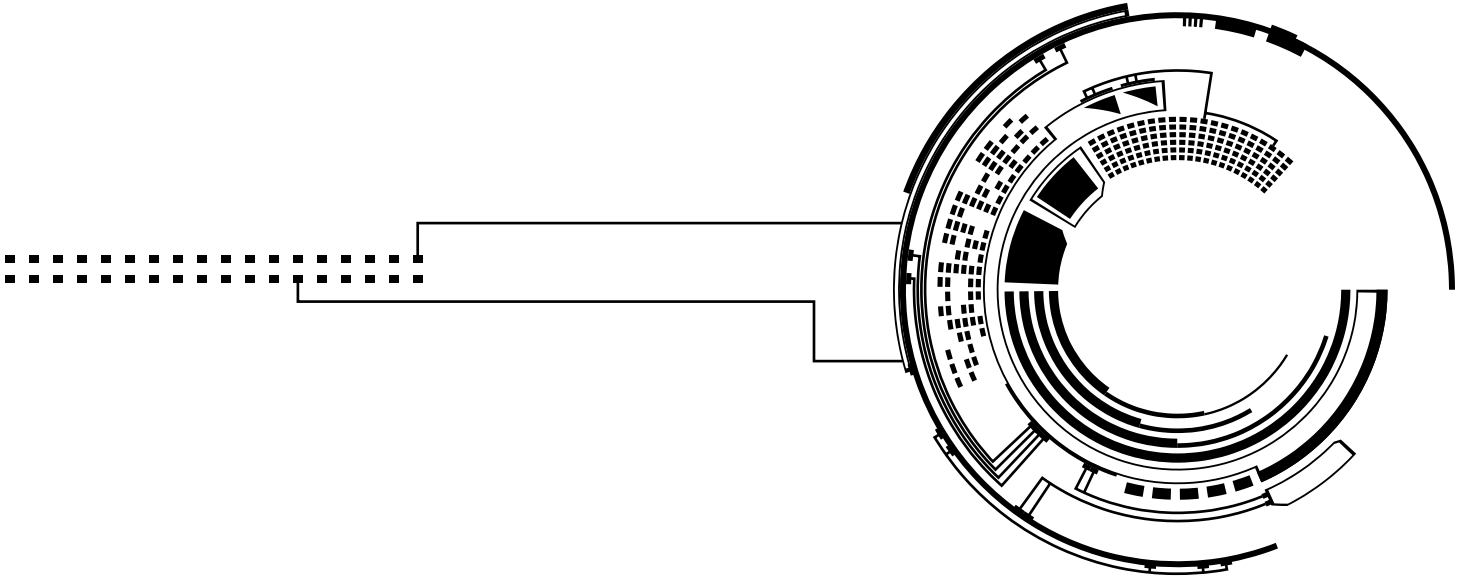
One hundred thousand died on day one. In the few years since, as that number climbed toward a million, Singapore's status as the world's beacon burned out, its money and talent flowing to Zurich. There are rumors that Singapore's gangsters have taken over some of the worst hit areas, slowly repopulating, cockroaches after a nuke. But the city won't ever catch up. The gap just got too big.

It's not so different here. I see it every day beyond this crosswalk, on the actual train. Aug and reg shoulder-to-shoulder—but aug standing a head taller. And multitasking. And multilingual.

Even though non-augs could use the 22-hour workday to catch up, it's the augs who don't suffer sleep deprivation or pack on fat or need help learning new skills. Just like with Singapore's survivors, if you have the credit, hormone and gene therapy can deliver enough mood and memory reconditioning to change the narrative forever. It's just that ever since then, the people who need it most can afford it least. And the ones who can? They're toasting in togas.

At last, the trolley we've been waiting for passes.

The E-Tram, a modified Schweizer Standardwagen, gingerly goes by, half-century old green paint chipping off as it huffs and puffs up our modest hill. Since the early 2000s, E-Trams have collected unwanted electronics and appliances, alleviating the need for illegal dumping by stopping in all ten neighborhoods each week. On a special day, you might see a two-door fridge, or a microwave and toaster, bricks soon mortared in, made invisible by vintage keyboards, hair straighteners, alarm clocks. On an extra special day, you'll spot the rare and endangered corded phone, its frayed tail poking out through the pile. You'll stare, as I do, at our wasted past, the innovations stacked like bodies in a plague wagon, the E-Tram patrolling onward for something newly poor or broken or dead, pulling dutifully for ash.



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SINGAPORE

"Gurmit!"

This time, I'm yelled at because I'm taking too long in the bathroom; and not by Lim, but my father, Adnan; and thank god, not due to any traumatized tourists, but my slightly-less traumatized mother, tired of rushing out the eggs just so they'll congeal.

"One second!"

"Already twenty seconds! Respect your mother and I!"

I will not win this argument for many reasons, so I return to my reflection. I've never particularly liked this version. It's the tired one that stumbles back into its childhood home after a hard night working a job that underpays so savagely that it must return here night after night. The bathroom where I first pooped and suffered through puberty now hosts a reflection ravaged by the boredom of what came next: adulthood. Two black circles under two red eyes; dry skin at the corners of lips that mouth-breathed processed air. Hideous, but a canvas nonetheless, which is what the Axcentric ad calls it on the projection behind me.

You are your masterpiece.

It's a fitting tag. If you want to look like priceless art, it'll come at a price with lots of zeroes. For now, even with all the new money flowing into Singapore, what they're calling "elective human augmentation" is something only the Lofts' wealthiest guests can afford. I'd always thought Axcentric's off-site locations handled actual procedures, leaving The Isle's to handle research trials, patents, credit checks—but after last night, I don't know. They're doing *something* with that block of rooms.

"Gurm."

That time: mother.

I dry my hands, fly downstairs, take my seat.

"Sorry."

She looks at me like I just came out of the womb. Helpless Gurmie in need of food, sleep. A burping.

"Always sorry," my father echoes. "Sorry, sorry, sorry."

"When I was your age," I say, sitting up taller, "I worked five night-shifts! Simultaneously! Sometimes, the sun wouldn't come up for twelve days, and I worked all dozen night shifts five times

simultaneously without a single cup of coffee! But *y-o-u*! Lazy! Tired! Failure!"

My father laughs his version of a laugh. Imagine a squeeze bottle failing to eject that last bit of ketchup. A sad, snorting splatter—frustration as exhalation.

"Besides our son here," mother says, dropping a heaping plate of toast and the kaya spread, "the only ones working this many nightshifts are the 54. Neighbors probably think we're housing a criminal."

My father looks me up and down incredulously. "Him?"

"What, I couldn't be a criminal?"

That ketchup laugh again.

"No, Gurmit. You're a talker."

I suppose I should be insulted. If you're going to join a gang in Singapore, you could choose far worse than the 54. For almost 150 years, our local syndicate has lived up to its namesake, the 54 Immortals. Founded by Chinese and Indian immigrants, the 5 stands for "no," the 4 for a similarly pronounced Chinese word for "death." That namesake, No-Death, is just what the 54 Immortals have done since the time of Goh Qiant, surviving decades of instability on firm footholds of high-class brothels, friendly drug dens (half of Geylang), and leadership based on bloodlines. Nobody not named Goh ascends 54, but 54 itself has ascended, evolving from boosting food and clothing supplies from International Aid drops to supplying soldiers with Advanced Military Tech. And as the city's has gotten richer, they've grown from escorting call girls around

town to delivering them straight to SAF officers and Singapore City officials.

"You never know, father. I tackled a woman at work today."

Punctuating the sentence is mother's trusty egg timer. Black coffee, kaya toast, soft-boiled eggs. Nothing more Singaporean; nothing better.

The timer shrills on as my parents look at me, expecting to offer more details. The troubling part is they don't even seem surprised. They just want the story. I think that might be what parental love is. Fear of every single thing in the world that could conceivably hurt your precious child, but never the fear that your precious child could ever hurt it back.

That, and the way mother heats butter into molten golden lava for our morning kaya.

"She was sprinting down the halls," I continue, "totally nuts-o. Screaming about drones attacking. Apparently she's from LA, and you know, the thing there. She was at The Isle for treatment."

My mother brings over the white pepper and soy sauce, finally sitting down.

"Poor thing. Was she going to run over a railing? Fall?"

I know mother's just fishing, trying to get me to backtrack over some phantom lie from when I started. She's convinced that any floating building is bound to tip.

"I told you a million times. Every hallway is self-enclosed. If

you ever came to visit, you'd know that."

"We have nothing to wear to such a place."

I motion, indicating to mother what I'm wearing. Our Lofts-issued "performance polos."

"I like it. One less thing for me to iron around this house."

"Anyway. I was talking about how I tackled a woman."

Father pauses the destruction of his yolk.

"Your heroic tackle. Did it at least give her a concussion?"

"You *want* her to have been concussed?"

"It would suggest you tackle like a man."

"Well. No. I don't think so."

"Like I said," father concludes, tearing into his toast.

"A talker."

"I just stopped her. I didn't want to hurt her."

"This is the whole problem," he answers, a new yellow-tipped corner now in the air, "with all of your generation. You're talkers! Negotiators! Nobody wants to hurt one other!"

I look at my mother. Send her the *why-does-my-dad-want-me-to-commit-assault* look. She motions for me to eat while the spread is still warm. She knows he's in full-on Angry-Adnan mode.

"Your tower, with all its rich people—these people who are followed and emulated—they are just too afraid to live on land. To commit! They hole up on an island next to an island. They pay by the night, just like their governments back home! No long-term thinking...only leasing! Where are the countries, the borders? Now it's airspace, alliances! Everyone afraid to compete, interact. Nobody

producing, only importing. Russia buys Poland's debt. Germany and France leave the Euro. EU joins with Russia! A Common Defense Pact! A Mutual Defense Agreement! All these pieces of paper...these little passive truces. It's like the world's happy to sit and wait for disaster."

"Dad."

"Lunatics."

"Okay."

"Heads in the sand."

"Okay."

"Deserve what's—"

Mother's chopsticks slam down on her plate.

"Adnan."

You'd think the egg timer went off again it's so silent.

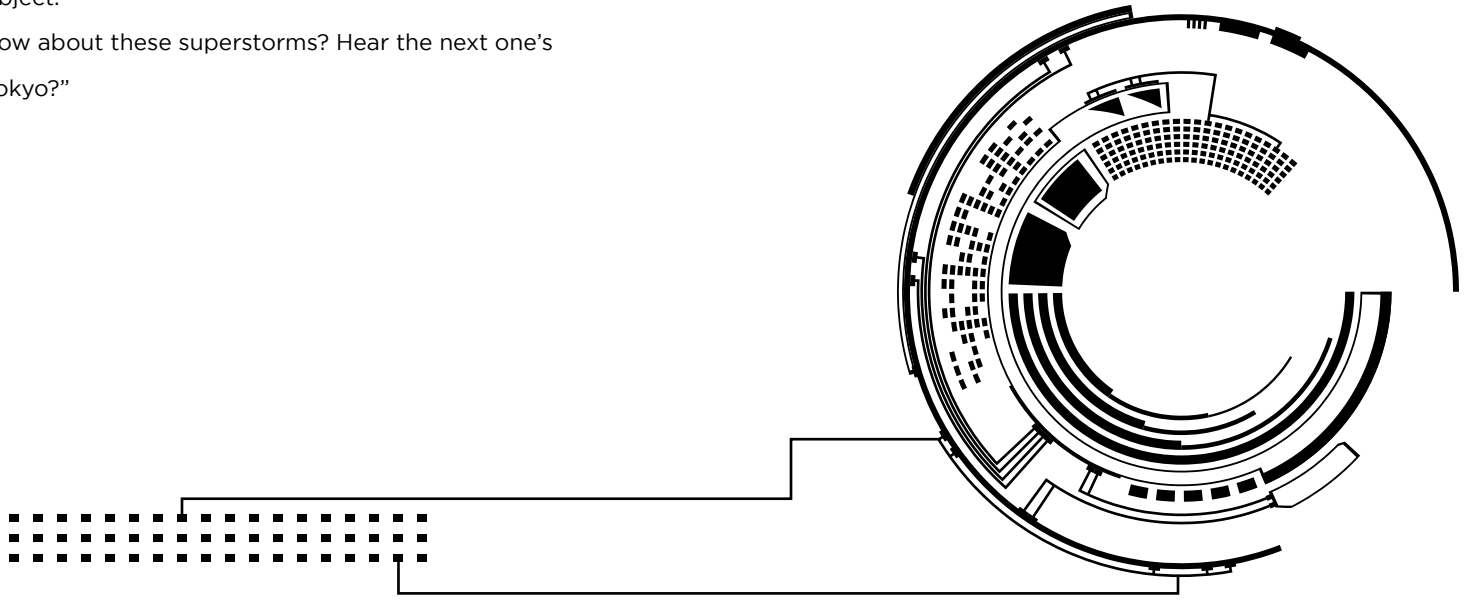
"Just look out there," father finally says, motioning out our small apartment's window at the newly minted laser turret. "Every damn nation has a collection of those now! How's it make any of us safer if we all sign the same paper, install the same stupid equipment?"

He's referring to the ground-based megawatt drone defense system. After LA's attacks, the technological arms race hit its highest gear, with everyone who signed the Winslow Accords installing a D.E.A.D. system beside their most strategically significant sites—high-value buildings, airports, stadiums. Overnight, defense systems sprouted like dandelions, the metal towers blooming like weeds popping between slabs of sidewalk.

He’s right. Mother and I know it. But what can we do? We’re in an important city working on important initiatives for important people. We’re making important advancements and whether or not the world’s better or worse afterward isn’t for us to judge. It’s for us to forge.

Given my status as the family talker, I talk. It’s time to force a change of subject.

“So. How about these superstorms? Hear the next one’s approaching Tokyo?”



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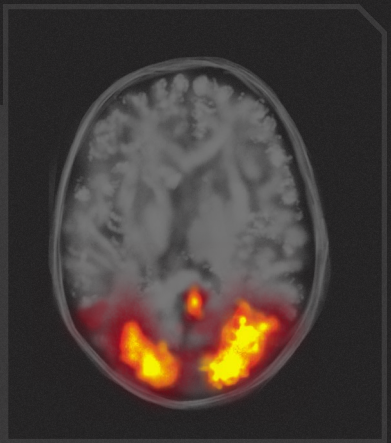

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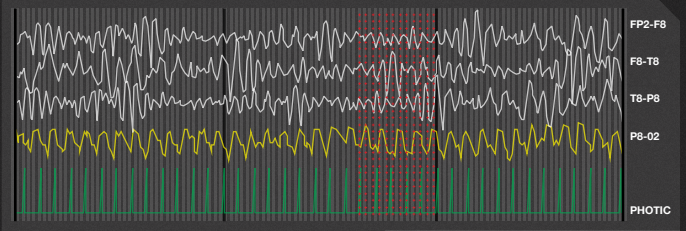

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Reaction Speed	77
Integrity	35
Practicality	75
Regulatory vs. Exploratory	66
Reliability	82
Emotional Masking	91
Loyalty	65
COMPOSITE MATCH	**88.2**

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GURMIT_2037

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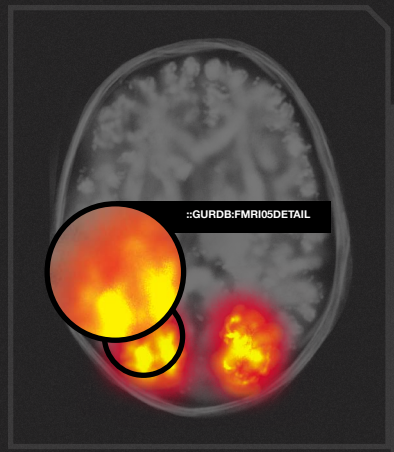

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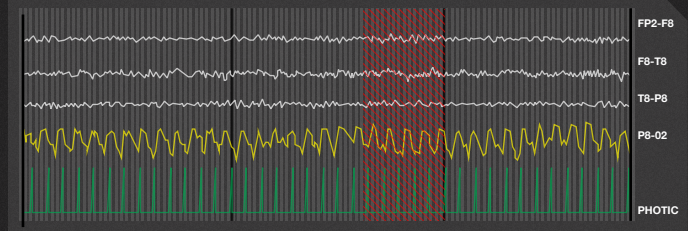

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Reaction Speed	79
Integrity	41
Practicality	69
Regulatory vs. Exploratory	61
Reliability	62
Emotional Masking	85
Loyalty	79
COMPOSITE MATCH	88.2

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ZURICH

The dry run is over.

Coalescence Corporation's new Zurich headquarters were completed exactly sixty days ago, but today—after countless training sessions, debriefs, and VR-tours—the building will finally open for business, extra-staffed and fully operational.

I experience Turicum déjà vu. It might be the sheer amount of glass and money, the newness of the building. Or maybe it's the sheer number of augs. Company vets who have taken advantage of in-house augmentation for years walk in rank-and-file with us, mere us, a smallish, rather average army of new recruits—a class of two hundred filtering in for the very first time, popping our cherries

along with the new HQ. The architects, on-hand at the entrance, sipping champagne, look like proud parents terrified of prom night. That agro blend of awareness and acknowledgement—"Do not *dream* of hurting her" mixed with "There's no avoiding *some* damage."

At new-employee orientation a week ago, I don't think any of this dawned on us then like it does now. We bought in that *One Coalescence Way* was a new beginning for the company, but they explained the new headquarters as a way of flexing our vertical muscle: combining networks of global satellite offices, consumer and enterprise research labs, pretty much anything that was on the books (and especially all the rest off of them) in one behemoth building—to coalesce, just as our name pledged, into a stunning glass monument to our impact on the world.

But today we realize this isn't just a tower—it's also a *fortress*.

During construction, those architects over there with the teary eyes were celebrated not just for *One's* design but also its new dynamic exterior. A proprietary blend of colloidal quantum dots would allow the surface of the building to absorb solar energy on every surface, powering a circuit of conductive coating and liquid-crystal molecules. The result was supposed to be the world's first self-sufficient building exterior, able to fluctuate between clear and opaque glass by individual pane—a kind of self-powered tapestry of refracted and reflected sunlight.

Today, however, we've arrived to find the building not

transparent at all. It's solid-steel gray.

Our first day at Coalescence will begin in total lockdown.

The building stands as tall and silver-plated as a giant rocket awaiting blastoff. The quantum dots have assembled into some third, unannounced setting— a reinforced exterior that appears as cosmetically strong as structurally, almost like a Kevlar dust cover on a tank. If I had to guess, *One* can bear ballistics, if not a full-on plane.

Down in the building's shadow, a few dozen armed guards patrol the perimeter but like most humans in combat these days, they are more for show than anything else. It's the swarm of drones above them that do the important recon, feeding real-time radar, infrared, and spectrum datastreams back into sub-basement command centers that beam them back up to the roof where I can see direct-energy anti-aircraft lasers rotate back and forth across the city's skyline with an a 3D printer's preciseness. Mini-D.E.A.D.S. The only way not to feel safe with those on the roof is to make too much eye contact with the encampments of exoskeleton'ed strike teams at the intersection closest to the building. They look terrifyingly irritated.

A new haptic alert hits my mobile. It's from *One,* the building a contact like any other boss or friend or Turicum waitress (her final sales pitch: "there are more augs than meets the eye").

Two sharp, shrill pulses announce the update as CC; a three-second tremor confirms our threat level.

Green—yellow—*orange*.

The building has received a threat, but it remains business as usual.

Inside, it's just that, so normal it's abnormal. The lines at the body scanners and biometric stations move quickly. A few couriers get processed in the visitors center. On the far east side of the lobby, I see a small batch of underdressed employees—combat boots, urban fatigues under sweats, canvas bags in place of briefcases—enter a side-elevator seemingly accessible solely to them. The rest of us head to the main bank of elevators, hungrily awaiting our orderly rows of scientists and technicians, executives and admins, underwriters and lawyers. Each batch is delivered to their floor with an individualized newsstream, never realizing sensors in the lift are scanning vitals for anyone that might be catching a virus or a cold and reporting the results to HR. To most, this is one last, calm moment to sip siphon coffees. To let ears pop.

But not for my new team.

ComAffairs will always be on their own permanent version of orange, a full-fledged triage mode we simply call "work." Now in *One,* we will sit on the top floor with the CEO's support staff, because, I suppose, we are cousins once removed. My new team may not be setting his schedule or selecting his suits, but that's because we're less worried about window-dressing than bricks flying through said windows—quantum dot security-drapes or not.

My role along with the rest of Coalescence's Communications Affairs department will be to manage all things public-facing, be it the punctuation in a press release or the legality

of a government inquiry. If things go well, I'll never enter that east-side elevator, nor meet the dressed-down dudes who frequent it. We'll be too busy establishing stances and reinforcing partnerships, executing damage control if they backfire.

ComAffairs are the shepherds of every corporate exit strategy, allowing plans to graze, grow strong—then we execute. In many ways, we *are* the CEO, if not his actual decisions. We control what gets compartmentalized versus what gets congratulated.

When the elevator slides open, Julien is waiting for me.

"This way. Debrief already started."

Julien is the man who recruited me away from the pharmaceutical company I called home from university onward. He is tall, angular, and impossible to miss thanks to a mop of messy red hair some of us suspect is artificial.

"In here," he says, pointing at the entrance ahead.

For a company that builds humanoid combat robots and revolutionized battlefields with exoskeletons, our department's conference room has a fitting name.

The War Room.

Inside, a breakfast spread of acai, yogurt, and a mound of undisturbed danishes sit centered on the table beside emptied carafes of tea and coffee. I see why the livestreams projecting on all four walls disposed of any appetite. We have ourselves a bright swathe of morning bullshit.

The sitrep, a situation report, includes a new report from our contact inside the burgeoning aug black-market, who reports

Singapore has a chance to cut deep into optics margins. A gang there has replicated our patents on iris hue manipulation and are close to night-vision, with plans to price both at prices ten-percent ours by the end of the month. There's also a consortium of universities claiming our helium-based rigid-bodied airships aren't the transport miracle we claimed. New numbers on fractional distillation from natural gas—even with our helium extraction efficiencies—might mean Coalescence Corporation needs to find new, unique ways of filling vacuum transfer lines (or the bank accounts of those who can protect it). Then there's the anti-robot demonstration heading straight for *One.* Five hundred people, most not even from Zurich, marching for change that will never, ever come. They're why we're in shade.

Nothing about the ten-year anniversary, surprisingly. My nightmare won't extend to work.

Julien motions to the five team-members talking on various screenshares and private lines. "We've got these," he says, awaking another trayed alert and flicking it into my display. "This one's you. Been briefed yet?"

"No."

"Your first assignment then. Bon appétit."

I'm still digesting the brief when I realize every person in the room is looking at me.

Was I reading out loud? is the first thought.

Am I still wearing a toga? is the second.

I'm still looking ahead at Julien when I realize what might

be happening, who might be causing it, and in that same precise moment, I swear I see Julien's hair flatten down in response, tinting darker into a matte brown.

I *knew* it was aug'd, I think, and then snap back into focus.

"Welcome to the team, Bastien," the voice says.

I turn with my hand already extended.

"Sir," I hear myself say, all focus on the handshake. I've heard the man can squeeze syrup from firewood.

"This will be a nice first assignment for you," the CEO of Coalescence Corporation says to me.

Me.

"I look forward to it, Mr. Väst."

At a sturdy, sinewy six foot six, Coalescence's CEO stands an imposing two-heads taller than most, with at least two more heads' worth of imposing intellectual horsepower to boot. The stark blue eyes staring down at me now, newb of his all-important ComAffairs crew, are renowned for holding an ocean's worth of data, numbers we've all seen him fish out on-demand for legislative committees, internal town halls, public media interviews. But today I see first-hand that those eyes are also impenetrable, a kind of vault that shields him so fully that eye contact makes me feel like I'm looking into a fun house mirror—that I'm cartoonishly short and ghoulishly simple, a deformed human compared to the specimen I'm staring at.

If you're a man—which Mitzi might claim I am not—Väst just makes you feel insecure. He is, in many ways, Zurich's perfect

output personified. Born here to Swiss parents—built here by his Swiss employer. The company can time its internal clocks to his daily comings and goings, its bonuses to his bi-annual marathons, its quarterly earnings reports to the charity dinners he cooks himself. The Väst Story is a rags-to-riches for the augmented age. He has worked for some form of Coalescence Corporation since starting in data entry at one of its earlier acquisitions as a teen, growing with the company until he's very literally become its larger-than-life representative. His one brain can do it all: store a database's worth of data, visualize and load-test with an engineer's exactness, execute an action plan like any project manager or territory director. But it's greatest feat might be compartmentalization: Väst builds technologies for the betterment of mankind, but is just as happy to sell it to the highest bidder, keeping Coalescence's public offerings separate from our other revenue streams and sources, and even kept off of our own omniscient ComAffairs dashboard. Väst's vaults all this in his head, and maybe with those shady guys in the east-elevator—nobody else.

Whereas on most, dozens of mental and physical augmentations might blur the lines of what's human, Väst has somehow become the tasteful embodiment of augs done right, which makes him our company and industry's pinnacle, the pedestal who also talks on one. It doesn't hurt that he's one charming dude.

Väst smiles and points at my display.

"We had an augmentation customer pass away late last night, a few hours after leaving one of our legacy facilities. It should

have been a standard lung capacity boost—we've seen the demand for those spike here on the Singapore anniversary. Would you please look into it, considering the size of the potential recall?"

The word *recall* has almost instantly transitioned Julien's hair even further into a near comb-over. Väst's eyes haven't blinked.

"Yes, sir."

"One more thing," Väst says to me, motioning to walk with him out the door.

The team resumes talking as soon as we exit. Sound-scrubbers installed into the War Room's entrance immediately mask anything said to us or any other passersby.

Väst and I stand quietly in that silence. I feel acutely judged in that stillness. The quiet is invasive but invigorating, as if the day ahead is pushing out through the muted membrane of the conference room's entrance, an osmosis I feel my heart begin to race to. This high is precisely how Julien described the job on his first call to gauge my interest. That call was as surprising as this one-on-one with Väst, as Julien's what we call a Supermanager, someone who makes ten-times what the rest of his team makes. You'd expect an HR bot, some recruiting algorithm to blast out recruitment notes. Instead, Julien had done his homework, asked about particular situations I'd triaged back when I was in big-pharma. This conversation with Väst has a similar vibe. There's an adrenaline spike working on a stage this big, but there's also the Supermanager-like discrepancy between us, which only increases it, puts everything on an insanely higher order of magnitude. Julien

makes ten-times what I make but Väst earns whole countries' *GDP*s. It's a thrill knowing Väst had this conversation planned, hardcoded into his day plan like any other piece of data racing through his souped-up super-brain. It makes this gig
worth it.

"I didn't want to mention this in front of the team," he says, pointing through the muted doorway, "or on any recorded channels, but when you go, I'd love for you to pull down and wipe any secondary transponders the victim might have had installed."

Confirming, I touch my left temple, where training said they're usually installed.

"It's actually behind the left ear, into the hairline."

I nod. I don't ask how he knows about it.

Or why I now do.

Sometimes, I think, the best thing to do in a department called Communication Affairs is probably just limit your communication.

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SINGAPORE

I know something is wrong because I hear it clear as day.

"Gurmit!"

Something is *very* wrong because it *is* clear as day.

"Wake up!"

The third clue: that it's mother, because if it was Adnan waking me up, he would've done it silently, strictly physically, simply to accentuate that all I do is talk. Father would have tossed my comforter off the bed, then thrown me on top of it; ruffled my hair, then rifled me with a pillow. A splatter laugh on the way out of the room, now dark, because he just got home from work, and I still had yet to clock in.

But there stands my sweet, pacifist mother, peeking through a doorframe lit by bright sunshine.

Trouble.

"Gurmit, I'm sorry, I know you're tired, but you have to go into the office."

I can still smell the kaya toast from earlier.

"What?"

"You left your mobile in the kitchen after breakfast. It rang twice and then you got several DMs. I peeked. It looks important."

"Lim?"

"New contact."

"How long have I been asleep?"

"Two hours."

She tosses me the phone, already lit up in notifications. The first is my sleep scanner. It confirms I enjoyed one full R.E.M. before a swift end to the second one. I'm alerted that I have an +80% chance of catching a cold based on diet, exercise, exposure and last night's sleep patterns.

"Thanks, mother."

The next batch of notifications are from an anonymous contact. Its IP address is like nothing I've seen before. It has three less digits and lettering in it.

::UNKNOWN.SENDER//:V457-15-H3R3
// You helped my patient today @ vpitch. Come in asap. 100TH //
::SMMS_OP_ID//:440985-01A
::SMSG_ID//:9B449-DPM69

It takes a moment to realize my teeth are grinding along with the coffee beans downstairs.

I responded while boarding the monorail.

The daytime ride is vastly different from last night's. Sure, we're still zooming along, but this time it's not just blurs of neighborhoods I see, but their borders and landmarks—the Straight due south, shiny new megawatt class D.E.A.D. System on its shore, The Isle just off of it.

Already, I see the 100th.

The top floor before the roof holds the Lofts' most exclusive collection of suites. No credit card company big spenders or loyalty upgrades to get one of these. Like any other skybox, they are lent only to the deepest pockets, corporations and the politicians they court.

I check my mobile again.

Whoever sent me on this urgent trip hasn't responded.

We fly south. Past old neighborhoods, new ones, old ones with new ones built atop, around and between, installed like updates to any other motherboard Singapore-herself gives birth to. We pass schools with real sandboxes and pitches with real goals until we hit the neighborhoods where recess occurs on giant grass fields—holo-playgrounds that pit kids with dodgeballs against cartoonishly friendly dragons or drops their football games into giant coliseums of sober, golf-clapping hooligans.

Block by block, the city gets cleaner, more angular and

efficient, more beautiful, as if the tide that passes through The Isle can only wash so high up Singapore's shores. Eyes locked on the 100th, I barely notice what Adnan would have gawked at—that new D.E.A.D. system's sub-ballistic barrels, up close and personal, pointing south toward an unstable world. It looks almost fake, statuesque, less combat-ready than a monument to readiness—a giant ray gun reflecting rays of light.

We arrive shortly thereafter. Not sure who or what I'm reporting to, I leave my black Lofts polo in a bag, choosing instead to enter The Isle in civilian clothes. No wearables embedded in their stitching, so I don't auto-sync with the building. Unlike our customers upstairs, my clothes won't tell a room's thermostat to warm or cool, or a waiter's tablet whether to offer a hot or cold beverage. I walk in from off-the-grid and stay there, using my RFID to gain swift access to the 100th floor.

Though the velocity upwards makes my ears pop, the first sound on arrival is one I still recognize.

A pinstriped man's chuckle.

"Sorry if we woke you."

I shrug.

"I'm Christian."

"Gurmit."

He nods like he knows, then turns and begins walking away. I jump out of the lift in order to not get taken back down.

Normally, this is the only elevator bank that serves the Lofts' 100th floor. At night, that means Lim or I usually sit at the

desk ahead, dutifully in wait for a guest's demands or approach. We have lots of rules on etiquette and timeliness but the first one refers to attendance: someone must *always* stand sentry here. It's the precise reason I know I can watch JJ at sunrise—I know Lim won't leave the reception foyer until I come back.

When we arrive at the desk, nobody is behind its monitor. No backlit display indicates someone will be right back. The entire area is abandoned.

"Is this what you need?" I ask. "Did the daytime desk operator call in sick?"

"This?" Christian asks, surprised. "Not at all. This is purposeful."

He lifts his arms in each direction and as they pass my shoulder, I shudder, suddenly remembering that syringe he keeps somewhere on his person. The one filled with knock-out juice.

"All this," he says, motioning across the foyer, the two branching halls, even the ocean outside, "is why we called you in today."

"The whole floor?"

"We've rented the 100th. Every suite. Also most of the 99th."

He must see me attempt the math.

"Don't worry, Gurmit. We can afford it. Axcentric Systems has been at The Isle since the beginning. Without our commitment, I'm not sure we have those turbines down there that keep the lights on. Helps when we need to call in a favor now and again."

I recall the woman with PTSD. The other LA tourists who just arrived.

"What do you need with that many lofts?"

"Good question," he says, walking away again.

As I scramble to keep up for the second time, I sneak a peek back toward the desk. The monitor is off—and not just the screen, but the wireless charging station below it. Christian and his team must have switched the whole pod offline after Lim and I left.

We amble down the hall like we're here on vacation, heading to our suite. But compared to Christian's tailored jacket and super-shined shoes, my hastily-selected warm-up jacket and sneakers suggest we're not friends, but that I'm some kind of au pair or maybe a masseuse, and then suddenly I feel that way—trailing behind like hired help, someone unofficial, someone about to be paid under the table in cash.

His pinstripes straighten at the entrance to suite 104.

JJ was staying in this very room before he was granted full residence two days ago. I'd thought it was another perk from management, like exclusivity on the v-pitch, but now realize it might have been this man in the suit. Christian flicked away a superstar like an ant.

A wave from his mobile should unbolt the lock, log his entry, alert the staff. It should activate an algorithm that analyzes the weather outside and time of day, distill what he's eaten and how much he's exercised, check his calendar to see if he can relax or has work. The lofts we offer should calibrate to their clients precisely.

What we open to is vastly different.

"Welcome," Christian says, swinging open the door.

I barely hear it.

The room isn't the room. Enhanced soundproofing and an insulated subfloor kept the sound out of the hall but now, inside, the screaming hits me in the gut.

For a moment all I can do is stare, eyes watering, at something I don't understand. Gone are the computer-controlled blinds and window dressing, replaced by blackout infrared-proof curtains. Same for any furniture that wasn't installed into the floor or a wall stud. Luxury and light have been pushed to the edges and left in shadow, the room remade into a triage center of some sort. In the main suite, about a dozen gurneys have been rolled into spotlit-broken darkness, each bed paired with a lab station of medical instruments, monitors, and a workbench. A series of overhead fixtures rain sterile white light on each little partition's nucleus, its patients, some wild-eyed and animalistic, pawing at their restraints, and others tranquil, eyes peeking over vintage paperbacks. Between them lie a range of ragers—drooling on themselves, spitting and cussing at phantoms, a group harmonizing on notes of anguish, mourning, and terror. He takes four earbuds out of his pocket. Touches two pairs together, syncing them, and hands me one.

"For the racket."

I put the plugs in and follow him to the closest bed—a middle-aged man with a haggard beard but boyish complexion.

"He hasn't shaved since the drone attacks."

"Huh?"

"Push and hold," Christian motions, using his own earbuds as an example.

I lean into the pair of plugs and suddenly I'm deaf. No screaming or moaning. Nothing but white noise.

"Better?"

Gone are the terrors.

Just him.

"These are critical," he continues. "We'll hear each other but none of the nonsense. I was just saying that this gentleman hasn't shaved since the drone attacks. Used to be a Botox guy, one of our first augmenters. He kept up. But totally went numb afterwards. Stopped all personal maintenance, then eating, then drinking. Started shitting himself in bed every morning."

The man's fingers flutter above the bed's blanket.

"Is he awake?"

"Sleeping off his last round of treatment. It's an important part, getting rest. It's when the brain reclassifies what it just saw, reconditions the memory. That's half the battle."

"What are you guys treating here?"

"The brain."

"As in?"

"Here it's PTSD. But what we're doing on the 99th and 100th is more a proof of concept than it is any one disorder."

I must look confused because so does he. It's a father-like

frustration, like Adnan earlier.

Christian reaches down into the bearded man's lab station and pulls out VR-glasses, not unlike JJ's earlier. These are taller and wider, more bulky. Less tuned for athletic movement than full immersion.

"Put his on."

The device activates and I'm transplanted into a simulation of a huge outdoor amphitheater I recognize instantly as the Hollywood Bowl. In a city broken up by neighborhoods and freeways, caste systems of beauty and money, this place, carved deep into a hillside with a backdrop of the Hollywood sign, relished something the rest of Los Angeles never could: a shoulder-to-shoulder togetherness. Tonight, 18,301 share a movie. We share space on benches and in box seats, we share the 35mm film playing on massive screens above the band shell, we share its duet with an 80-piece orchestra. Even through the simulation's earbuds, sound bounces off the outside walls of the Bowl and ripples backward through the audience magnificently. We share that like we share the sunset. Like we share in quiet. We talk just loud enough to hear in order to flirt with our dates, or our neighbors', sharing opinions and fears and nervous kisses as the world's light dims into the film's black-and-white. Then we share cups and cutlery. We share napkins when spotted by snacks eaten in the dark, bounties we share from overflowing grocery bags at our feet. One guy at the end of my row brought a pizza just for himself but gives in, trading as neighbors do for some candy or popcorn. We share responsibilities, helping

hold seats when someone runs to the restroom, or to warn when an usher looks too carefully at the way we sneak in sips of smuggled booze from our thermoses and coffee cups. We share bottle openers. We share blankets. We share two hours of joy here, in the heart of Hollywood, where there is a little more magic. And then we share the whistle.

I realize what's coming.

A little annoying at first, then nothing after.

But as badly as I want to look up and search the sky, I never do. Her hands have found mine and now I'm searching for something else, sharing in something else. I see what the man with the beard saw before he had a beard. Not just the moment before this giant, gorgeous crater becomes another kind of one, but the moment his heart fills and overflows—the shared moment when a black-and-white movie exploded into color for them before it will explode into color for all of them.

The whistle, then.

Louder until it's everything, then nothing.

The glasses are pulled off my head—

Blinded—

Shaking—

Eyes won't adjust—

"Stop.

"Gurmit, stop.

"Gurmit, stop screaming."

It takes a moment.

To get my bearings.

He's talking.

Like nothing happened —

"Hey."

— pinstripes slap my cheek. The sound reverberates through my head and bounces back out through the whites of my eyes.

"Hey. Snap out of it."

Like nothing happened—

"Thing is, you see that differently than he does. To you it was new but to him, it's the thousandth time out of a million. He'll always relive that, and that's key."

Christian drops my VR-goggles back into the workstation.

"Like I said earlier, the problem is the brain. It's this tangled, three-pound curd of neurons, connective tissue, circuits. A lot to hack."

I think I hear the whistle again. I look up.

"Stay with me. It's tough, I know, but that's just a sim. Think of what's in his *head*. It's not like we pulled that memory out, either. That's fiction. A writer wrote it. We used a modified video game engine to render it since these goggles don't have unlimited processing. The wife's face—*that* was a bit of magic, though. Scanned in the real one, then reverse aged it using an algorithm the augmentation and enhancement divisions wrote up. The *you are a masterpiece* team."

I still haven't blinked.

"You see what I'm saying, Gurmit? What you saw was *that* powerful as just an *approximation."*

"Why do you make him watch that?" I ask, not remembering when I stood up or balled my fists.

"Your reaction, right now. I make him watch it because he can't do what you're doing. And that's just the first problem."

Christian swings the monitor toward me and zooms in on a bisected brain scan.

"Here, in the hippocampus," he says, magnifying, "is the dentate gyrus, a little wedge of cells that feeds CA3, where pattern separation takes place. Pattern separation is everything. It's what keeps our memories from jumbling together. We encode events

using all fives senses in ways that allow them to be distinguished later—and just like we separate memories, we separate situations, too. Dangerous ones from riskless ones.

"Our patient here is so stunted by his PTSD that neurogenesis simply hit the pause button."

"Neurogenesis?"

"The birth of neurons and nerve cells. The PTSD stunts new growth, and with no new neurons in the dentate gyrus, CA3 begins to atrophy, which makes it impossible to separate patterns, regulate mood, help code those memories. PTSD is a vicious cycle: the memory's there in the first place because of a trauma, but then that trauma's limiting new neurons in the sub granular zone, which he needs to *process* the trauma. He's the reason he can't get better. There are no fresh neurons to do pattern separating. A kind of dysfunctional stasis."

"Can't you inject him with some new neurons? Grow some?"

"Tricky. You engage that whole area and memories will blur. We need to be discrete and super selective since one memory activates about five neurons out of a hundred, and a normal person creates about 1,400 *every day.* Now, you're right, we could produce them, but we'd need his own neural stem cells of which there are precious few regularly functioning before we go pulling them out, messing with what lucidity he has left. For us it's simple. Go for a jog and we'll come home with some new neurons. But he's bedridden, so exercise won't help kick production into gear. And we can't really pop him with P7C3, because that promotes the survival of newborn

neurons—it won't catalyze new ones."

A lot of acronyms; a lot of science. And that's not even what makes the least sense.

"So what is all this?" I ask. "If you guys aren't helping activate his brain, what are you doing?"

On the monitor, he pulls up a frame from the simulation I saw in the goggles. A few swipes later and the same frame is tiled across the entire monitor, from top to bottom, but across a spectrum of minute variations. At the top, the colors and shadows are stark and foreboding but in the middle, they're a binary black and white, more noir, like what I saw. Toward the end, they've warmed, a sunset haloing the entire scene in bright, warm light. It transitions from nightmare to daydream.

"Memory isn't a file on a hard drive you can delete or rewrite. Memory is just a *version* of the *last* time you thought about something. Decades ago, brain trauma treatment toyed with neuromodulators, as if that would be enough—like a dose of memory vitamins could boost recognition. But as you can't erase a memory to death, you can't clarify one to death, either. The only thing you can do is amend its emotional connection, and thus amend how it's reconsolidated. You have to recondition a memory's *meaning*."

A pinstriped sleeve cycles the monitor's tiled frame from dark to light.

"That takeaway took forever. When we first started, this whole process was reliant on all the wrong things. We started in

optogenetics, smuggling genes for light-sensitive proteins into neurons so that a pulse of light would turn the neurons on or off—it's how we treat blindness now, but back then, we flipped the cells of a painful memory like a light switch. It took a decade of those bandaid fixes before we realized emotional valence is the key. Now we play the PTSD-causing memory over and over, reconditioning it as we go. Give a rat pranolol with a shock, and you can weaken its memory. It'll forget the shock, but won't recall what caused it clearly. Give it some isoproterenol with a shock, and you'll strengthen its memory. It won't ever forget the shock. Now, we don't erase or turn off—we recondition. Our patients have authorized us to allow them to re-experience the most traumatic things affecting them, intervening the reconsolidation process with anti-anxiety drugs and neuromodulators to assist *how* they reclass it. No more light switch—now it's a dimmer."

Christian points toward the middle of the screen, the black-and-white version I just experienced first-hand.

"We're half way through with this patient, and we'll go until the memory's meaning thaws. Then we just refreeze it as something else."

I think for a moment, scanning this room of insanely wealthy people willingly reliving their most haunting nightmares. I look around and see what Christian sees, which is the beauty in all this brain stuff, and what Axcentric might, which is the money in it—enough money to take *two* floors in The Isle.

But then I see what my father might. Adnan's voice rises in

my head, another kind of whistle. It's what he said this morning, how he called this tower full of rich people too afraid to live on land. It gives me a thought.

"Couldn't this do the opposite?" I ask.

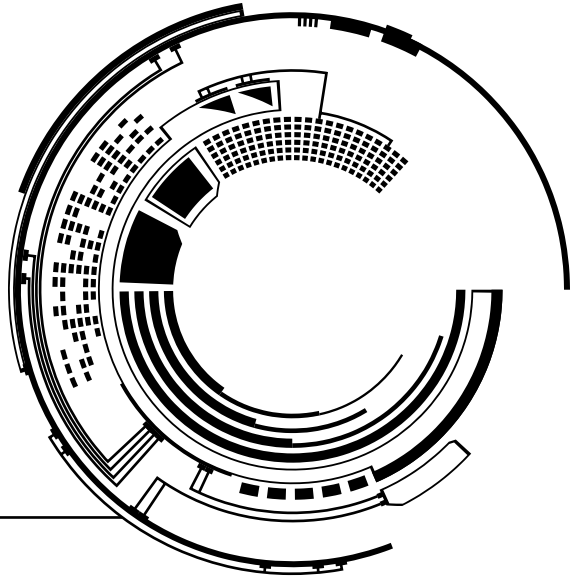
Christian looks up from the monitor. "What do you mean?"

"If you change things so that someone can't separate a dangerous situation from a safe one, couldn't you create someone fearless just as easily as someone who forgets their fear?"

Christian's eyes narrow.

He stands up and reaches around the bearded man's workstation, pulling out a white lab coat. He hands it to me.

"You're brighter than I thought."



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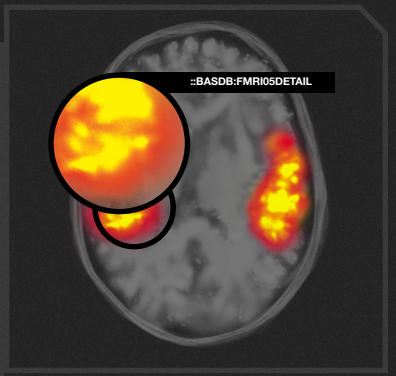
BASTIEN_2063



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::SUMMARY//:BASTIEN SHOWS SIGNIFICANT BLOOD FLOW TO PARIETAL LOBE WHEN RETURNING TO MORE AWARE STATE AFTER "DÉJÀ VU" OF TURICUM, TRIGGERED BY CROWD OF AUGMENTED CO-WORKERS ENTERING ONE.

>>GENERATING.VOXELS.FROM.PLAYBACK...

>>GENERATING:GENERAL.DIFFUSION.FIBERS...

>>SECURE.STORAGE//:CONNECTED

>>TRANSMITTING//:ANALYSIS:\\16.4%

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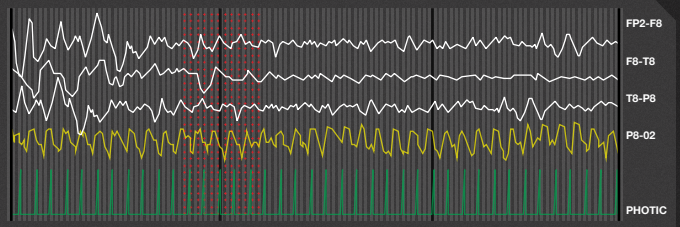

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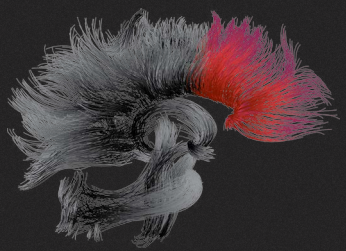

::SENSORY.PERCEPTION//:POINTOFINTEREST//:045

::SUMMARY//:BASTIEN'S ACUTE ALERTNESS REPRESENTS A PERFECT MATCH TO BASELINE. CONFIRMED VIA EEG OUTPUT FROM CANDIDATE'S FIRST INTERACTION WITH VÄST, AS WELL AS SUBSEQUENT CONVERSATION.

::SUMMARY//BASTIEN'S MEMORY-TO-SENSORY RECALL SCORES ABOVE-AVERAGE. ACQUIRED BY COMPARING VR-TRAINING TO FIRST REAL EXPERIENCE AT ONE.

>>GENERATING.VOXELS.FROM.PLAYBACK...

Info Processing	79
Reaction Speed	88
Integrity	91
Practicality	80
Regulatory vs. Exploratory	85
Reliability	92
Emotional Masking	93
Loyalty	96
COMPOSITE MATCH	90.1

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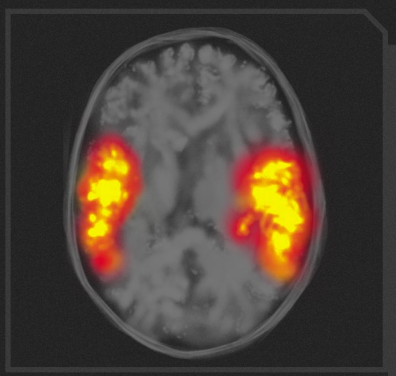
GURMIT_2037



::SUBJ//:GURMIT

::RECORDEDASSET//:08842
::OCCEPITALLOBE.POINTOFINTEREST//:064
::PLAYBACK//:02:08:22:47.02

::SUMMARY//:GURMIT SHOWS A SIMLAR RESPONSE IN PARIETAL METABOLISM. ORIGINAL BASELINE ACQUIRED AT HOME, POST WAKE-UP, FROM KAYA TOAST SCENT.

>>GENERATING:VOXELS.FROM.PLAYBACK...
>>GENERATING:GENERAL.DIFFUSION.FIBERS...

>>SECURE.STORAGE//:CONNECTED

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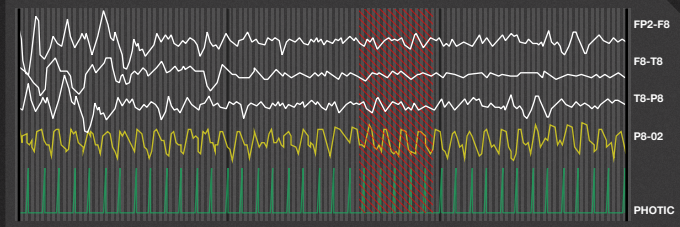

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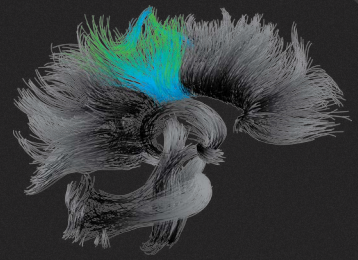


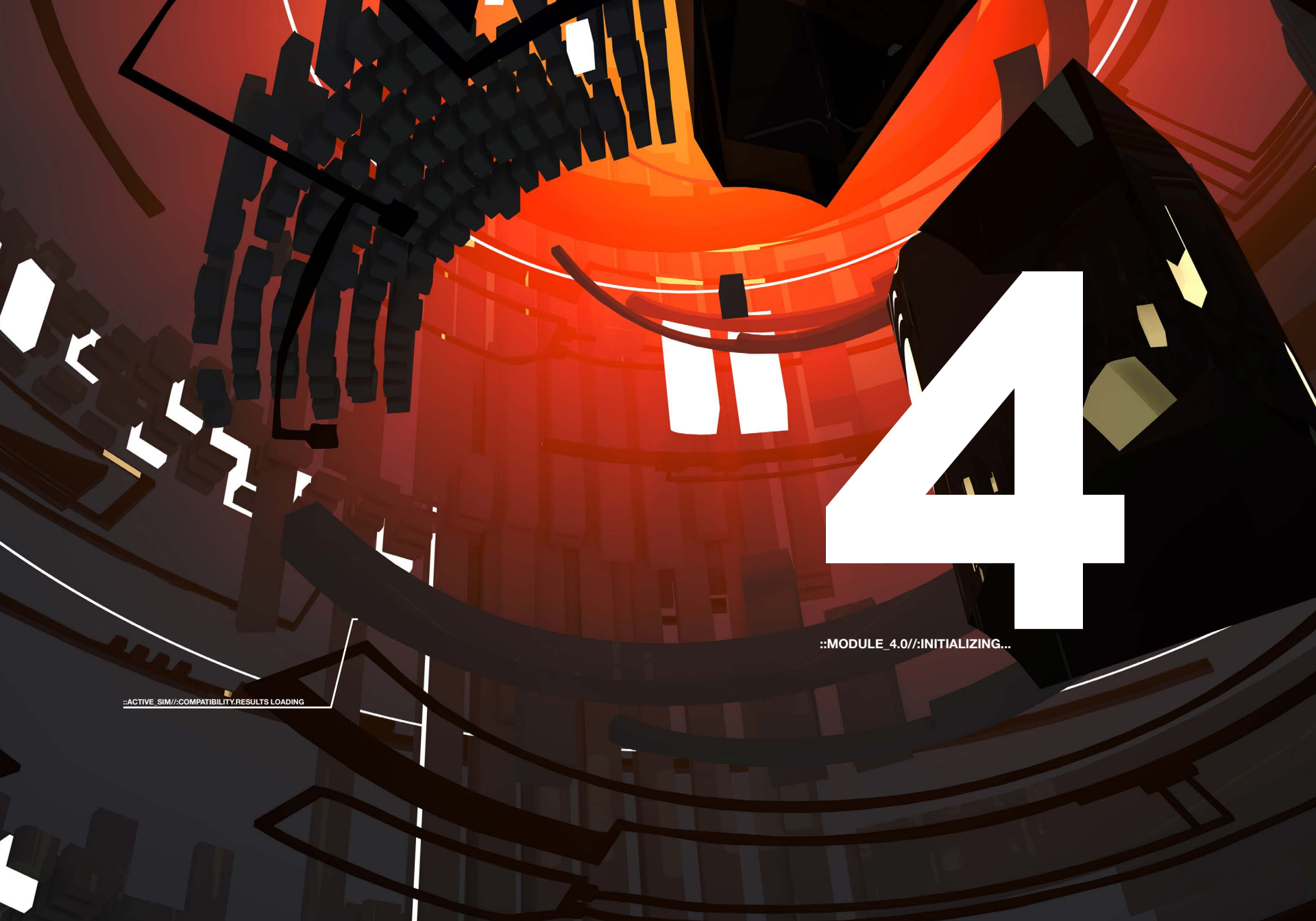
::SENSORY.PERCEPTION//:POINTOFINTEREST//:166

::SUMMARY//:GURMIT'S EEG CONFIRMS CANDIDATE'S BASELINE AS DESIRABLE. COMPARISON EEG EXTRACTED FROM GURMIT'S FIRST CONVERSATIONS WITH CHRISTIAN IN THE ISLE. F8-T8 ADJUSTED DUE TO GURMIT'S LONGER TENURE AT WORK THAN CANDIDATE.

::SUMMARY//:GURMIT'S RECALL SIMILAR TO SIMULATED CANDIDATE'S. MEMORY-TO-SENSORY BASELINE REACTION ACQUIRED WHEN WOKEN UP SUDDENLY.

>>GENERATING.VOXELS.FROM.PLAYBACK...

Info Processing	88
Reaction Speed	91
Integrity	85
Practicality	86
Regulattory vs. Exploratory	98
Reliability	85
Emotional Masking	92
Loyalty	83
COMPOSITE MATCH	90.1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ZURICH

The facility Väst mentioned is just a few stops away—no transfers and normally an easy commute.

Sadly, the aug's death has killed that, too.

As soon as I input my destination, a barrage of updates confirms it won't be an easy trip thanks to backed up traffic, pedestrian detours, forensic roadblocks by on-site police. Even delivery drones are being rerouted. Desperate to avoid the congestion, my device warns, attempts to reroute, updates my ETA every ten feet until, exhausted, I cuss technology and turn off navigation support altogether. I suppose I can't blame the device for not understanding why I would be so stupid as to walk right into a crime zone. I still can barely believe it myself.

On day 1, and on Väst's orders. Suddenly the Roman festivities at Turicum seem just that ancient.

Half an hour later and just a few blocks away, Julien messages, asking for my personal line. I shoot the number back and it rings a moment later.

"Bastien, ask for the manager of the facility. Then tell him you'd like to see Axcentric."

"What?"

"I don't know. The CEO's admin just passed that along in *ink*, said to keep it off company intranet or comms."

"Okay."

He hangs up without another word just as I arrive.

If it weren't for the police sweeping for evidence and interviewing the last of the witnesses, I might not recognize the facility at all. Unlike Coalescence's typical corporate offices and locations, all that signature glass framed in transparent polymers, this particular facility looks downright prehistoric thanks to an exterior of brick (not even eco-brick!) and zero sprouting. Inside, the Coalescence vibe kicks into higher gear thanks to corporate-provided franchise collateral—advertisements for augmentation services, hormone management programming, all the usual offerings. Projected via holo-signage near the front window display is the franchise's biggest price-break: lung capacity enhancement.

Instantly: a dead boy and dust masks, projected in my head when I remember why this manager was offering a sale. So many suffocated during the Singapore incident that fear caused

a major run on oxygen tanks for house, work and vehicles. The next natural step, of course, was for microscopic internal tanks—an augmentation that would allow someone who can't breathe to breathe just a few minutes longer. It should have been popular amongst swimmers and firefighters but enterprising franchises like this one made it a mandatory amongst everyone else. The anniversary of hundreds of thousands of deaths is quite a bit of free publicity.

Upon entering the storefront, a few detectives attempt to shoo me out, but my new Coalescence Corporation credentials come in handy. After what I imagine was some expensive lobbying—and some free augs for a few politicians in need—new Swiss law has made it very cut and dry when it comes to company property in the physical body of a potential augmentation death: individuals from the corporate offices are allowed twenty-four hours to execute a full body-scan parallel to any detective's investigation to ensure company legal teams can validate the warranty and analyze data logs to confirm and prepare for wrongful death suits. This all came about because price breaks on lung boosts weren't the only thing to come out of Singapore—it's also the birthplace of the black-market, which necessitated this whole twenty-four hour amendment.

Rumor is that after the Seascraper sunk due to Superstorm Daisy in 2050, a bunch of underwater salvagers found old equipment in the ruins and used them to reverse-engineer some remedial hacks. Like any self-respecting criminal endeavor, the market didn't just survive the incident: it has thrived ever since. It's

rarer here in Zurich, where most can afford to pay up, but abroad it's not unusual for a good majority of customers to jailbreak our viral-delivery mechanism and load up on counterfeit augs. The hope, in situations like these, is that we can prove a DNA DRM breach (takes just one errant liposome). Then the company is no longer liable to pay or suffer publicly for the customer's death. It's when Julien and the team probably revs up the press on black-market risks and we actually see an uptick in new customers.

"Is the manager here?" I ask the room, once inside.

The main waiting room is abuzz with detectives and police, but nobody offers anything. They're busy collecting evidence and scanning the scene for 3D walkthroughs, jury sims, all the stuff that comes later. With a few members of his staff being interviewed nearby, I spy the franchise's owner sitting alone, leaning on the entrance to one of the application suites. I don't need to confirm it's him by asking or muttering Julien's little safe word—one look at the man's perfectly pruned, proportionate, symmetrical face and it's clear: this guy enjoys his corporate discount. He's probably a Turicum regular.

The man smiles a set of dazzling whites as I approach.

"Saw you at the door. You from corporate?" he asks, extending a manicured hand.

"Yeah."

"I'm Niklas."

"Bastien."

"Thanks for coming, man. Got the full download yet?"

"Fill me in, if you don't mind?"

An errant drone peeks its lens through the front doorway and snaps a still. Cops start yelling at each other because airspace is supposed to be clear. *Goddamn paparazzi!* The cop who ID'd me scrambles together a spectrum scan to ID the snooping drone but it's already gone.

When I turn back to Niklas, the experience seems to have awoken dormant vanities—he's licking his lips, wiping his forehead of any sweat. He runs both his hands through his hair meticulously, mashing some parts down, twisting other ends up, everything somehow staying locked and spiked in place through product or aug—who the hell knows.

"Some kid came in here," he finally says, "no different from any other. Paid in bitcoins, which was sorta weird. Older cryptocurrency but we didn't think anything of it. We confirm him as an authentic aug'r, start prepping his selection. Just like we do a thousand times before. It's a lipid-based injectable, this latest one for the lungs. Shouldn't even kick into gear unless oxygen drops in the bloodstream to critical levels. Next thing we know, like seconds after the application, my staff's calling because the guy is breathing deep but motioning like he *can't* breathe. Turns red, passes out, dies right on the spot. Right here in my shop! Ruined business for-fucking-ever."

"What's the official word?"

"Suffocation is the technical cause of death. On-site forensics already confirmed high carbon dioxide levels in his

blood. They showed me his eyes, too. Creepy stuff, man! All red. Completely bloodshot, which I guess is a telltale sign of suffocation. A normal death turns them whites cloudy."

My mind flickers back to this morning's dream—the boy's parents at the end, staring into each other's eyes—as I wonder if they, too, turned red. It bothers me that aroused eyes in Turicum did the same thing.

I'm pulled back to reality by Niklas, flashing those pearlies like the drone's camera earlier.

Something is making him nervous.

"What do you think happened?" I ask.

"Who knows. Buggy aug? Maybe it deactivated his ability to oxygenize his blood instead of the opposite?"

"Where's the body?"

"Still in the application suite."

I follow Niklas up the hall, a few steps behind. Even after a long morning sweating through the police's questions and interrogation, his odor aug is doing its job. The man stinks of lavender.

"In here," he says, allowing me to enter first.

A police flydrone snaps our photo as we enter, immediately switching into surveillance mode. The drone might be fifty years newer than anything else in the room; it's ancient by Zurich standards, boasting old crank windows and even a socket for wired appliances. The oldest thing in the suite might be the gurney the customer died on; frayed and worn, it looks more mancave recliner

than canvas for cutting-edge gene-therapy.

The drone, now boasting a blinking red light, buzzes around the room watching, recording, transmitting.

"Pest!" Niklas says, swatting at it with a Coalescence pamphlet.

I think he could get away with not agitating our civil servants, but the dead kid before me evaporates any desire to say something. It's my first body. I bring my sleeve up—the lavender's barely hanging on to its lead.

"Police ruled out foul play pretty quickly," the manager says, flashing those whites again.

"Why's that?"

"See here, by the mouth and nose? Looks normal. No bruising. That means he choked to death on his own."

"Do you have the kit?" I ask, looking around the office.

"Yeah. Sure."

He comes back a minute later with the small, well-worn piece of hardware. The device, a mandatory piece of equipment in every Coalescence Corporation franchise, pulls down and uploads the data record of any customer. We spent over fifteen hours doing practice runs on it in VR training. It's how a franchise like this one uploads its purchase logs securely, how corporate roll-out updated versions of the DRM-DNA system, how a tech can load quickscans and complication algorithms into the global database.

In the case of a death, it's how we also download and delete transponder records for the lawyers.

"Give us a second?"

"Sure."

Niklas leaves, his lavender shadow lingering as I turn the device on and eye the kid's left ear, the hairline behind it.

These days, account transponders aren't hardware but a data receipt we code right into the DNA of an aug'r. The kit needs a few minutes with a drop of blood for the data extraction. The last generation was an actual physical-transponder formed by a collection of nano-particles injected right under the skin near the temple. Powered by excess electrical energy produced by the brain, those would take longer to sync with the kits—a few minutes at minimum. That's the one I motioned to Väst but he mentioned there was *another* transponder, secondary to the temple, but still near the ear. I hadn't heard of that before.

I doubt scanning the side of the dead kid's head will raise any red flags but I position my back to the drone anyway. I'm thankful it stays in the corner of the room, soaking up the sunshine coming through an old leaded window. The bricks must be affecting its wireless charging.

Niklas's kit scans for any physical transponders and finds just one, right where Väst promised. I set up the kit to mirror into my device and let it fly, but a minute later, we're at 5% complete. It's completely throttled.

Niklas pokes past the doorway with another of his blinding grins. "So we good?"

A long pause in which I think about the drone recording,

what this potpourri-scented idiot could say wrong, why the extra transponder isn't even into double-digits yet.

"Niklas, you got a latex glove?"

He returns with a pair I use to gently tilt the victim's head in case there's interference from this ancient chair—a metal backing that might be interfering with the uplink.

Staring back up at me, emblazoned on the leather: the logo of a giant letter "A" fused with a giant letter "X."

My eyes dart back up at Niklas. He realizes I know. His arm drops down off the doorframe and thank god, he's smarter than he looks. We stay quiet. We don't say a word.

Five minutes later, my device has a new log holding 10% of its total memory capacity. It's a file format I've never seen.

I walk out of the room, as far as I can get from the dronefly, still buzzing above the corpse like a real one. Niklas follows me until we're at the front of the store, under the holo-signage. There are cops everywhere but nobody is paying much attention to us.

I lean into lavender and say the word.

"Axcentric."

No teeth or smile this time. Niklas's eyes narrow.

"Come back after close."

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SINGAPORE

Christian walks me across 104 to the leftmost bed—one of the quieter victims.

Her eyes don't register us, but dart like a deer's. Drool has pooled her clavicle.

Between checking vitals and swiping through her chart, Christian explains that his research partner won't get in until tomorrow.

"I appreciated your help last night," he says, shining a light into the woman's eyes. "and since I have to head to the 99th, I was hoping you might be able to cover the 100th. All you need to do is go room by room, bed by bed, and help launch each patient's sim-progression. The meds will automatically measure and apply through this apparatus on the side, but you have to sync this code labeling the sim to the applicator. It's pretty systemic, but this is the one part that requires a little physical input."

He shows me how to check which sim the patient ran last, where to find its label code, how to enter that code to the drug applicator. He reminds me to close the doors behind me as I use my Lofts staff passkey to go from room to room—one of the reasons he says he called me in the first place, besides my tackling skills.

"It depends, but most sims are a few minutes each," he says, "so on your downtime, I'd just check on all the other patients in a given room. They'll probably still be reconditioning the memory. Or recovering."

"What do I check for?"

"No bruising or bed sores on the ones earlier in their progressions. Enough water and comfort for the ones deeper. And always the restraints."

"The restraints?"

Christian pulls up a corner of the drooling woman's blanket to reveal a kind of tentacled harness holding her in bed. It looks firm but flexible—secure enough that she can't get out, but can easily move and adjust her position.

"Installed them on the higher flight risks after our little chase through the halls last night."

We walk through two patients together—the old man with the paperback and one of the worse-off ragers. I notice each patient has a pair of earplugs, just like Christian and I—that must be how

the simulation fed the LA scene's audio into my ears, but also how they keep from hearing each other. My earplugs block them out but remain synced with Christian, who at some point transitions from instructing and demonstrating to humming as we pace from patient to patient, his pinstriped shadow nodding along behind me.

It's an odd thing, in this mausoleum of silent screams, to hear that humming. Not comforting—but not distracting, either. Another kind of white noise.

Christian chaperones one final cycle before leaving me to continue on my own for the adjoining master bedroom suite, where I assume he'll attempt to sleep off his own long night before heading down a floor.

The door closes behind him, unpairing our earplugs.

Plunged back into white noise, I help the next patient in utter silence, putting on her goggles, noting the sim-code, setting up the applicator. Nothing for a second. We enjoy a safe, simple stillness.

Then, with only the beat of my heart narrating, it begins, my pulse a steady meter for her craning neck and clenched teeth, my heartbeats rising in earnest with her arms, wrestling phantoms and a bedframe, until by the end I am the deafening to veins and eyes bulging, as invisible breaths gasp—gasp—gasp. I am the rising drumbeat to all her muted agony.

Afterwards, we exhale. We catch our breath together.

I can't bear to stay quiet during the next one. I start to talk to them. I'm sure Adnan would roll his eyes—there's Gurmit, always

talking—but what else am I supposed to do? The Californians are inconsolable. They're not even present. They're compartmentalized in a spectrum of simulated terror, and in the room, and on the 100th, and off-shore on The Isle—compartmentalized no different from their memories—and so in whatever way I can, I break them out, sharing stories about my family, where we live, what I do here. I tell them how when they get better, we'll take trips up to the roof and lay out by the infinity pool. I tell them about JJ's practice sessions. I tell them to, no matter what, avoid the lamb gyro at the 24-hour diner in the first subterranean level.

Singapore, I tell them, is *safe*.

In this way, I end up talking to all the blank, dead faces of 104. To sobbing eyes and to eyes that look past me, and to all others who look through me. I selfishly don't shut up because soundproof doesn't mean blind, and the fits of terror that thrashes them side to side—that arches their harnessed backs in the air like a poltergeist—terrifies me.

I don't know how much time goes by but it's all twelve patients' worth, each story playing out on the monitor beside their gurney. I make my small talk with each, chatting with a mother whose stroller they find a block-and-a-half from her lunch on the boardwalk; a teacher taking roll on a field trip, his school's bus flipping over a freeway's concrete divider; a pizza restaurant's line cook, barraged by a storm of bricks pre-heated by the nine-hundred degree oven; a grandfather visiting from out of town, blowing bubbles in the backyard with the kids.

I talk to all of them, on and on and on until, behind me, a chuckle.

"Pretty nice bedside manner there."

Christian's rolling his sleeves back down, buttoning cuffs.

"Good nap?" I ask.

"Oh, far from it. We have a patient in there." He nods for me to head to the bedroom. "Looks like you're done in this main room, so in about ten minutes, give the patient in there her first sim. Collecting some baseline data first. Then you're free to go on to 105 onward. It's just supplies in 101 and 102. 103's empty."

Christian does that thing where he abruptly walks away, this time locking the door behind him.

It's silent again besides my mind, racing, as I think about peeling out, heading home myself—another piece of kaya toast and a good, long blackout. I start thinking about what my excuse to Christian could be—and whether his weird IP was a mirror, if he can even receive messages?—and then I backtrack from the whole idea, as Christian trusts me, and that's worth something—especially since he can probably have me fired—likely *worse*, given this is off the books.

But then I return here, the now, wondering what might happen to them if I leave, these patients, tethered and terrified—observed, then, by just the furniture, pushed up and stacked into stadium seating, leaning against the double-doors separating the main-room from the bedroom—the room I walk into now—distracted by this barrage of random, stupid, silly things until I see who is

laying there in the bed, at which every thought freezes, reassembles into one.

Her.

Centered before me is the woman I tackled yesterday.

She's silent. Sleeping. Maybe dead.

Bare feet that sprinted through halls yesterday poke out from under a blanket.

I walk a little closer.

"Hey."

I sit on the edge of her bed.

"You, uh, look good. Better than before."

She's definitely not dead. Between tiny puffs of breath, her grayish eyebrow twitches.

Upon closer examination, I discover a transparent sticker just above that eyebrow. Laid out across most of her forehead, it appears to have some circuits visibly weaved through it, with *Electroencephalographic Transducer* printed along its edge. Her workstation has an extra monitor compared to the patients in the main room, where the results of the transmission on her forehead come through as squiggly lines that track the electrical activity in her brain. After last night's episode, she must have demanded a little extra effort—maybe a new baseline, as Christian said.

"So," I whisper. "Just wanted to apologize about yesterday."

Out of the corner of my eye, on the monitor, the electroencephalographic patch charts a minor tremor.

"Know I knocked the wind out of you. Have to say you're

pretty fast for your age, though."

The tremor spikes again, and then the squiggly line sprints up and down like she ran the halls last night, breaking from the baseline every time I say something new. So I keep saying something new. I babble on and on, realizing, sitting here after all of room 104, what Christian meant about my bedside manner. I thought he'd meant it as a joke, but it was true.

His humming.

My talking.

These things register *somewhere* inside.

So I tell her about Lim, how she helped him enjoy his first workout in years. How my mother used to run long distance when she was younger, also barefoot. How she slowed her pace for my father and I when we all ran years ago, when I was in high school. How she would never admit it afterwards. The stories aren't important but seeing the electrical data animate makes them important.

"Let's get you started, shall we?"

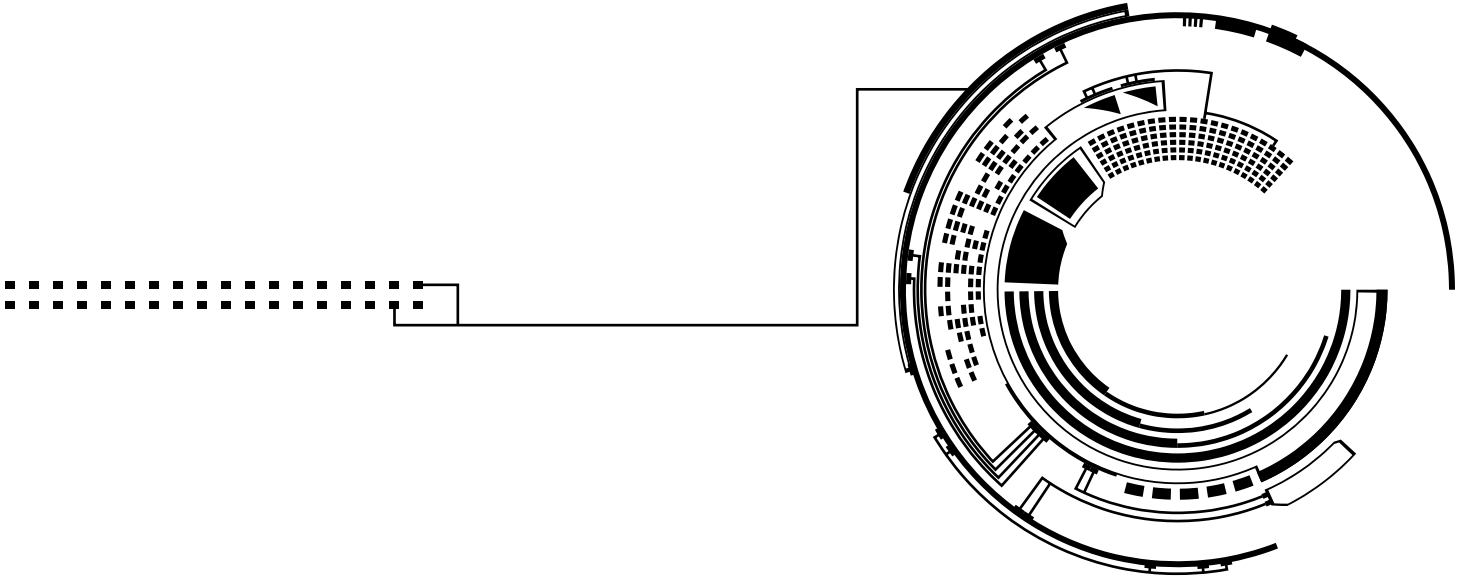
The woman is incredibly calm compared to last night, so much so I don't feel totally comfortable putting the goggles on her or activating the sim. I don't know what Christian did, what he's tracking here, but it seems to have already worked. I fear we'll only regress her into what's in the main room.

I reach down under the workstation and pull out the charged goggles, putting them on my face first to tighten the straps before placing them on her. And I suppose, one day, this will become

the precise moment that I decided to embrace all this and go to room 105, 106, and every other loft of patients—why, on the way back to the elevator hours from now, I'll be too exhausted to notice Lim poking around the front desk, or to care when he starts asking me why I'm not wearing my polo, or worried when he threatens to audit my geotags within The Isle. This moment is why I won't panic when he asks me why I came out of 120, nor when he begins flipping a shit because his RFID key won't open the door I just came out from. "I'm the GM!" he'll scream, "this is my floor!" and I'll stare back as serenely as the woman before me now, the sensor on her forehead confirming yes, she's present. I'll tell Lim these are Lofts guests but Axcentric customers. I'll tell him to respect their privacy, that I've got the foyer: that he can head home. There are no GM duties because the guests won't be making requests. At some point, Christian will return to the 100th, and we'll work through the night, and at the end of the shift, Christian will request Lim's transfer. We'll spend a week holed up until every one of these patients returns to Los Angeles stable instead of scared. Some time after, back home, I'll wake up to discover another kind of reflection. One I like.

Because this is the moment I put on the sprinting woman's goggles and see a boyish complexion smiling back at me.

I don't see his beard or hear the whistle of their bomb. We're before. We're when the first frames of a black-and-white movie come on, just as a hand folds around mine. I share a moment I've shared once already, this time feeling safe, saved, never more sure that what I am doing here is important, or that everything will be okay.



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BASTIEN_2063

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::SUMMARY//: BASTIEN'S FRONTAL LOBE HIGHLY ACTIVE DURING ANALYSIS OF CRIME SCENE AND IN-STORE ENVIRONMENT. EFFICIENT CATEGORIZATION OF DATA AND AGGRESSIVE CRITICAL THINKING.

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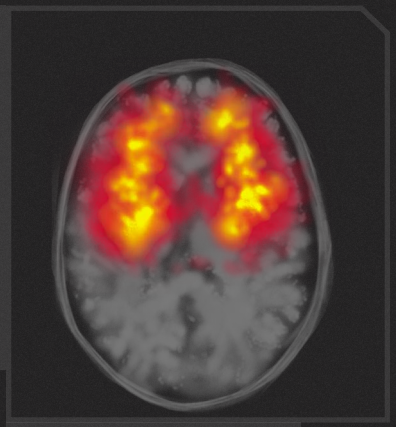
>>SECURE.STORAGE//:CONNECTED

>>TRANSMITTING//:ANALYSIS:\\22.7%



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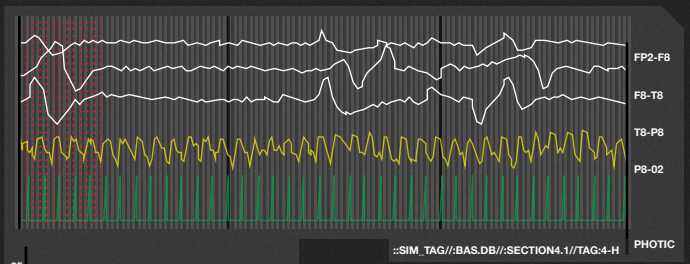

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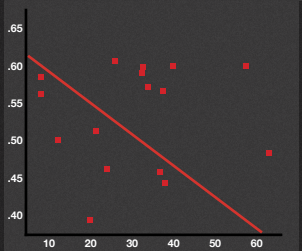

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::SUMMARY//:BASTIEN'S EEG AND FRACTIONAL ANISOTROPY MAPS SYNC WELL WITH EXPECTED VALUES FOR POSITION, AND ARE A HIGH MATCH TO BASELINE. CROSS-REFERENCE TIED TO CANDIDATE'S RECALL TO THE COALESCENCE "KIT."

Info Processing	96
Reaction Speed	92
Integrity	93
Practicality	92
Regulatory vs. Exploratory	95
Reliability	96
Emotional Masking	90
Loyalty	97
COMPOSITE MATCH	95.3

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GURMIT_2037

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::SUMMARY//: GURMIT'S FRONTAL LOBE ALMOST AN EXACT MATCH TO CANDIDATE. BASELINE ACQUIRED AS CHRISTIAN CATEGORIZES AND SUBSEQUENTLY EXECUTES THE PTSD SIM TREATMENT PROGRAM.

>>GENERATING:VOXELS.FROM.PLAYBACK...

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>>SECURE.STORAGE//:CONNECTED

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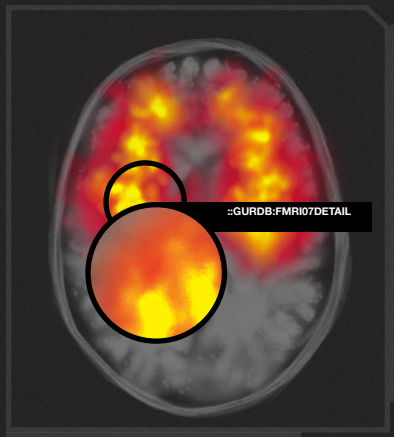

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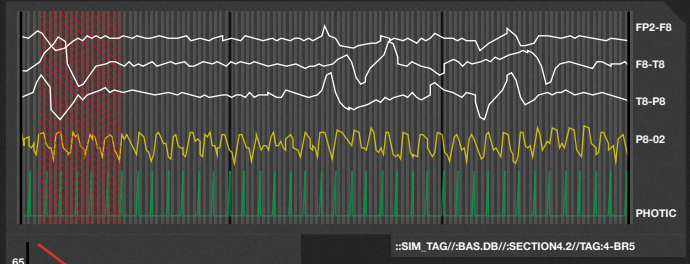

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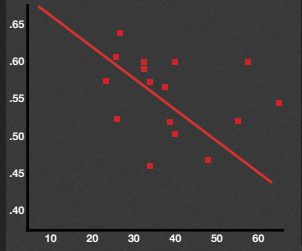
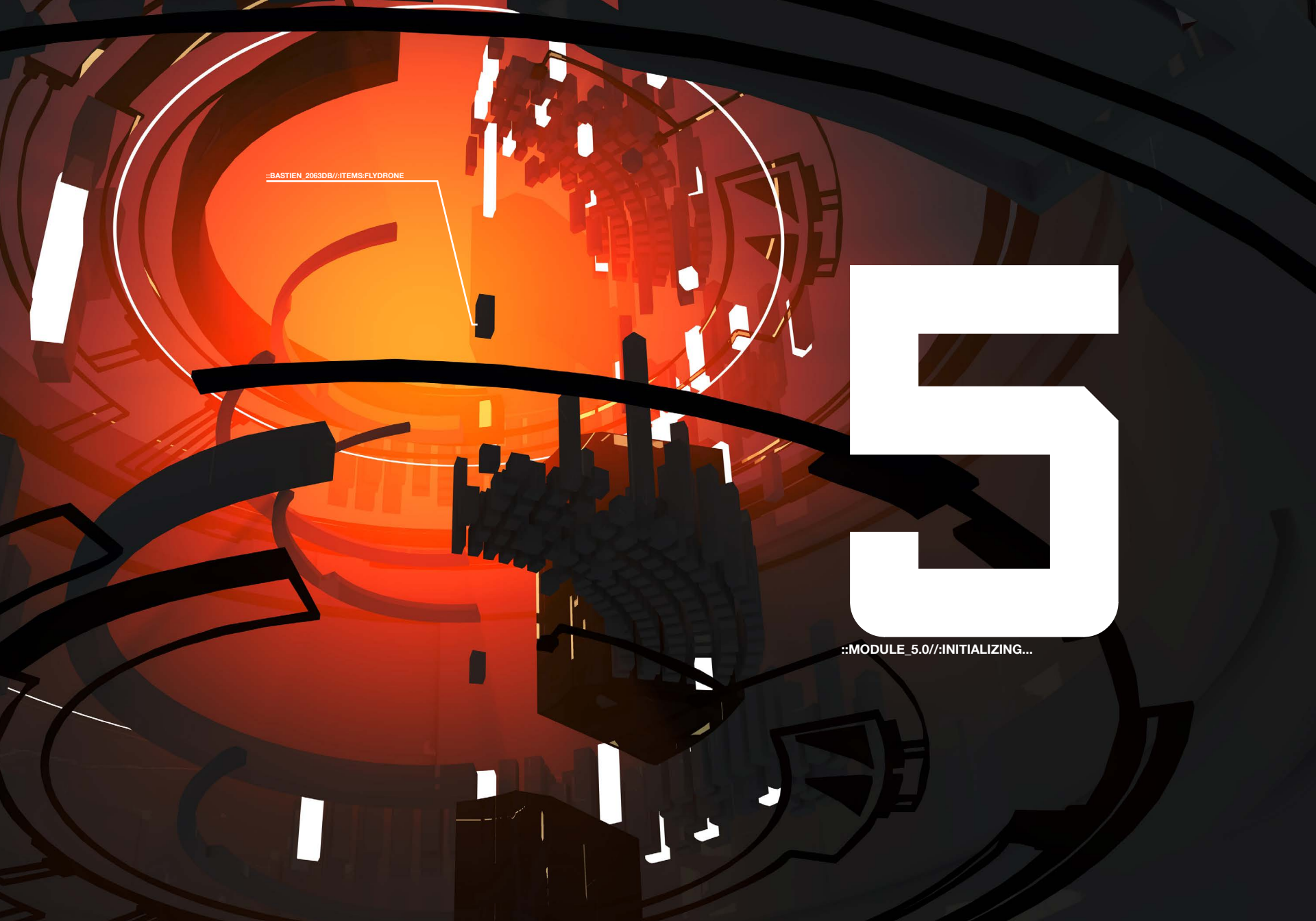


::SENSORY.PERCEPTION//:POINTOFINTEREST//:6612

::SUMMARY//:GURMIT'S EEG AND FRACTIONAL ANISTROPY RECONFIRMS CANDIDATE'S BASELINE AS A MATCH. CROSS-REFERENCE TIED TO JUST AFTER END OF SIM-TREATMENTS, AT MOMENT OF RECALL OF "HER."

Info Processing	93
Reaction Speed	94
Integrity	99
Practicality	93
Regulatory vs. Exploratory	95
Reliability	99
Emotional Masking	89
Loyalty	98
COMPOSITE MATCH	95.3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ZURICH

Four hours and six cups of siphon-brewed New Nile later, I'm jittery enough to bounce off Niklas's crumbling brick walls. I knock on the door at the back of the facility after the last police boots march off, waiting in the back alley entry like any other vendor or VIP.

"Come, come," Niklas says, locking the door behind me in a hurry.

The lights are off inside the store save for the holo-signage, casting a pallid glare on the front doors and sidewalk outside. In that darkness, the only sound I hear is the flydrone, still buzzing in the bodiless suite, and my voice, asking the first of fifty questions I've prepared in my head.

"In the suite earlier—"

Niklas clears his throat harshly and motions toward his office. He locks the door behind us quickly, which only boosts my caffeinated pulse higher. I worry, for the first time, that this crazed franchise owner will do anything to keep his business.

Niklas shifts his attention to the wall next to the door, where I expect maybe a knife, something old school and murdery, but the man's attention is focused on something small: something he only sees. I hear him peel back a sliver of tape which appears attached to yet another retired relic in this fossil of a facility—an old light switch from back when buildings like this used them. A moment later, the tape is gone and he's flipped the now-revealed switch, forcing a growl from a back-up generator next to the door. It's the last sound I hear before the office floods beneath a familiar tidal wave of white noise.

I'm sure I cuss with shock but neither of us hear it.

Niklas's white teeth beam two huge rows of shit-eating glee; he laughs noiselessly, if not maniacally.

Without warning, his office has become the very opposite of lit-up, loud-as-hell Turicum—it's a dark black-hole in which I can hear absolutely nothing save for my own heartbeat racing, my own teeth grinding, my own nostrils choking on his goddamn lavender, which is somehow more potent than before. This man with weird, moldable hair and a facility with nothing but old, retrofitted features apparently boasts a soundproofed space that trumps the brand-new membrane we have in *One's* most sensitive conference room.

The irony: I can't ask why even if I wanted to.

Niklas motions for me to come back behind his desk. He rolls back his chair and the Persian rug it stood upon, revealing an old copper hatch he lifts with a practiced heave. He makes another motion to move along. I comply, and once we're inside, the hatch is closed down above us.

Another pause, another duct-taped switch flipped. At last, the sound begins to creep back into my head in that way waterlogged ears return to normalcy in two, three, four violent shakes—I hear my breathing, and then a machine's humming, and then Niklas talking.

He's pointing downward at the only lights visible—a dim sequence of glow-in-the-dark patches stuck crudely to the left and right wall of an unlit passageway. My chaperone blasts those high-beams as if to confirm, yes, his smile can light a room. But it's to egg me on. "Go," he says. "Follow me."

I don't know why I don't ask or stop or worry. I just don't.

We climb downward, the air growing more cold and damp as we make our way deeper into the brick-lined depths. I think of the east elevator bank back at *One,* the compartmentalized projects Väst keeps from ComAffairs and everyone else. Who's funding all this?

After that first passageway, two ladders, and a small flight of stairs, we emerge into a massive sub-basement our footsteps echo deeply into. When Niklas finally activates the lights, the cavernous villainous lair I was expecting is revealed to be a clean,

spacious collection of lab partitions, desks, and equipment. The A and X icon I saw printed earlier on the gurney's leather now appears tiled across a thousand square-feet of monitors, server racks, workstations, and generations' worth of VR-goggles and simulators. A lot of it might be older-gen, but almost all of it appears to be functioning and in regular use. It's like the entire E-Tram has been detouring here, week after week, to drop off Zurich's most valuable equipment.

"Welcome to sub-basement 1," Niklas says, hair wild and pointing in every direction like an exclamation point.

"As in there's more than this?"

"Yep. There are three sub-basements."

"Christ."

"Yeah, this is a pretty old building. Nobody would expect it," Niklas says with pride, like he laid the bricks himself.

"Axcentric? Is this it?"

"Kind of," Niklas says with a chuckle. "This is just one facility of what was once dozens. Coalescence Corporation absorbed Axcentric Systems in 2042, and with it, an early foothold in the augmentation and neuron-imaging space. All of Axcentric's high-class clientele, too."

I take a few steps into the facility and look around. Every garbage can is empty, but the machines are on. Nothing has dust on it.

"But didn't augmentation start with DARPA? In '26?"

"That's how Coalescence got started, you're right. But

Axcentric, ThalTech, and all their competitors were researching and experimenting in parallel. Different applications and focal points."

"You work here? You work for Axcentric?"

Niklas bursts into laughter. "No, man. I'm a Coalescence man. Pension due in five."

"You have colleagues?"

"These workstations are all run remotely through other offices. I just make sure the machines stay cool, babysit the hardware. Do tours like this one for partners."

"Partners?"

"The less you know, you know?"

Something tells me those guys in the combat boots from the lobby have seen all this before.

I step more deeply into the facility, looking for any signs I'm being surveilled, reminding myself to do a spectrum scan before leaving. On the desk in front of us is an odd piece of equipment—a silver sort of helmet with a myriad of transmitters on its surface. The dome could be a model of the moon, its craters. I pick the unit up, pointing it toward Niklas.

"What are they trying to do down here? What is all this stuff?"

"Coalescence has mapped all 10,000 neuron classes. Everyone knows we understand how and where to manipulate memories, shed fears, dampen disorders. Brain augmentation is, generally, safe. The next generation is the rest of the white matter: not just neuron mapping or manipulation, but the nerve highways

that connect them. If we tap those, maybe we can access everything directly, and at once. Augmentation is one thing, but instant-access, a hive-mind connection amongst people? That's the ticket!"

Niklas walks over to the closest desk and hits a few keys. "But that's a ways off. Down here, we're doing something else."

A holographic bisection of both hemispheres blinks to life above the table. The floating brain flickers once before little beads of light begin to populate in the hypothalamus and hippocampus; soon they're flying through the toll way in the cerebellum, zooming down the optic nerve—before long, the entire brain is a vast constellation of shooting, burning stars, a universe come to vivid life.

"Imagine," Niklas continues, "that instead of creating a brain's perfect topography, we can create its diorama. Rather than map regions of neurons, we map neural spikes *between* each one of those neurons—one trillion one-tenths of a volt every *second!* You'd have a perfect virtual brain sim that could run any possible hypothetical. We could take all trial and error out of aug'ing—or anything else. John Q comes in curious, runs a test to see the net-effect on his contentedness or depression from a diet change or new meds or a change in salary, social stature, even significant other. You could run a simulation on two lives—see if you'd die happy in one versus the other. All right here, on a monitor, pre-aug, pre-choice—the ultimate neuro-forecasting tool for an individual."

He's talking about a fucking time machine. An alternate-reality portal. A cross-dimensional dreamweaver. I think of all the old comics I downloaded as a kid—my favorite hero replicated

innumerable times, littered across dozens of parallel dimensions with these little minimal differences. A longer cape. A longer hair style. A longer rap sheet. This simulator could conceivably create that. Innumerable Bastiens and Mitzis. None alive, per se, but with a couple aug tweaks and a life change—standing right in queue.

I don't understand how this could be good for business.

I think of Mitzi last night, lost on the dance floor but lost long before it—perfecting herself through expensive augmentations instead of having faith that someone will one day see her as just perfect, no augmentation necessary. Rather than waste credits boosting her cog abilities, her liver, a tool like this would let her just *live.* Measure twice, cut once. It would decimate margins.

I'm still holding the silver moon helmet, turning it in my hands.

"That thing," Niklas says, "is a super outdated version of Axcentric's acquisition tool, from Singapore in the late '30s. You dropped that thing on your head, answered questions, did some mental imaging—fifteen minutes later, carbon copy complete."

"Is this what you used on the kid? With the lung boost?"

"Oh, no," Niklas says nodding toward the rest of the sub-basement. "His treatment wasn't happening here, which is the whole mess of it."

"So what happened to him?"

Niklas nods like he knew the question was coming. He walks over to the next terminal over. "Have a seat."

After cycling through a few authentication screens, Niklas

pulls up the kid's file. The directory it's housed in is bursting at the seams: full video records of every patient interaction, doctors' observations, prolific data sets—the entire treatment history, nothing redacted or removed. It all seems very transparent.

"Looks like he was a volunteer, and in the last stage of the research cycle," Niklas says. "That's when the techs drop a more robust transponder in the temporal lobe so as to clone brain activity into the simulator—then they can evaluate everything in real-time. That last stage is kind of a sense-check to make sure his sensory inputs match in with our sim's outputs. Every candidate does this for a few weeks, on and off, for about half a year. It's essentially an audit, a dry-run."

"Why'd he die if it's just in clone mode? If he was just sending data outbound?"

"It wouldn't be much of a field test if we didn't get in the driver's seat once in a while, you know?"

I grit my teeth, clearly not knowing. Niklas runs a hand down through his hair, whose spikes stay lowered—the tail of a dog caught eating its own bullshit.

"Sometimes, rarely, really rarely, we reroute, let the sim execute some decisions. It's a test. They know we do it. We don't do it often. We always alert them first. There's a whole contract that promises we'll relent all control of an active-sim in personal matters, life-changing decisions, etc. Usually, we do it in the morning, before work. Or right when they get back. To a volunteer, the experience feels like a nap—a short blackout and a little grogginess, but back

to normal afterwards. During that time, a tech is in the driver's seat, monitoring respiration, heart rate, all the basics in the stem, executing basic motor skills. It's kind of like sleep mode, like laptops used to do. Harmless. The most we'll do in real-time is have the guy take a dump."

Niklas sighs, slaps his leg. "I guess it was during the reboot cycle back from active-sim that he saw the ad for lung boosts as he's walking by my shop. You gotta understand: he's half in, half out, but to me, he's just another doomsayer. I have no idea he's primo Coalescence Corporation property. No clue he's even rebooting from some remote technician's morning run. The kid just comes in, asks for a lung boost, and I pop him in the chair over there. I guess since he wasn't completely rebooted, the decision didn't get double replicated—it was in our server bank, but not in *his* memory bank. We injected the lipids into his bloodstream and when he did regain full consciousness, he didn't know why he was here, what was happening. Went into a little shock. Started hyperventilating. The problem was the lung-boost: it did its job and kicked in to give his bloodstream a boost of oxygen. That, combined with the transponder, the sheer panic—the kid just had a stroke. Died in the seat."

Niklas leans back and sighs again. "Just bad fucking luck that he ended up here. Of all the offices."

Some of it makes sense. The bloodshot eyes could still have been from a stroke, I suppose. Behind Niklas, I glance over the list of all the other individuals who signed up to clone their brain activity,

wondering how many are at similar risk. On the screen, I see launch dates that range from today all the way back to the mid-2030s, including patents in Singapore and the States.

"That's the story you're telling me?" I finally ask. "That it was *luck* he ended up here?"

Niklas doesn't high-beam or do anything salesy. He nods sincerely. Clucks his tongue.

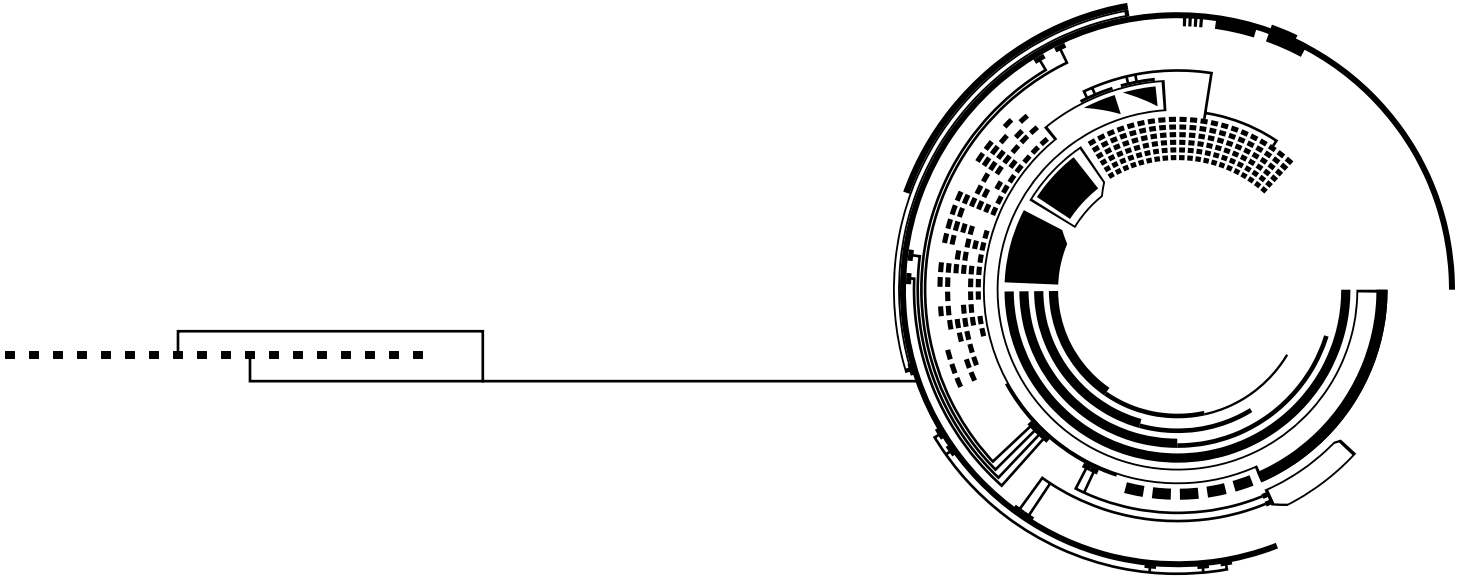
The hologram of the brain spins on behind us, a specter haunting brightly, waiting to see what I say or do next. I turn the helmet over in my hands, tracking my fingertips across the transponders like they are Braille, some hidden message that might explain how a simulation that can make sense of a trillion little shocks every second could do anything to help a child in a playground avoid trillions of windblown spores. It dawns on me it doesn't matter whether Niklas is telling the truth. The kid could have died down here and they smuggled him back up. All that matters is dead's dead, and there's no coming back from that. Just like a stroke, or a chemical leak. The issue is there will always be an unknown force, never forecastable, that will delay a train, or surprise you at work.

Like Mitzi.

Because no matter how badly my know-it-all sister would want to be first in line for a crystal ball brain that could forecast her life and maximize its every hour, if she could see what I see—all these data-records, decisions optimized by dynamic databases,

she'd be the first one to say the obvious: a forecasted life isn't a life at all. With no pain and scars, without a few stupid decisions, life would devolve into an idyllic dream you never wake up from.

You're better off getting weird.



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SINGAPORE

After the PTSD woman's sim, I check back on her husband, who seems calm, if not present. I roll him into the bedroom so they can be together, executing all the remaining rooms on the 100th afterwards.

By the time I'm done, Lim has arrived early for our night shift, those big interrogating eyeballs dishing out one hell of a wheezy death stare.

I don't let him into 120, nor let him in on what we were doing inside. I don't bother explaining my civilian clothes or why I've been working a dayshift. Exacerbated, Lim latches onto the one thing a customer couldn't have demanded.

"Why the fuck is the front foyer desk *off?*"

This one's trickier. It's a fireable offense. But then...I'm not sure who I'm working for at the moment. Technically, I'm not even clocked-in.

"Just stop, man."

"Stop *what?*" Lim asks with a sigh. "I get here and the desk's off, my shift's cancelled, and you're here, sneaking in and out of rooms. What the fuck am I supposed to think?"

"Don't do that. Don't think."

"How can I not escalate this?"

"Because if any of this mattered, somebody would have already flagged it. It's been this way all day. The day shift didn't even come in."

"You're here," Lim says, pointing at 120, "ducking in and out like you're sleeping with the guests."

"Lim. Plausible deniability. Consider it."

"I don't even know what you're saying anymore."

"I'm saying let it go. All of it."

"One of us is going to be let go. That's for fucking certain."

A long silent beat in which I consider my options.

There's my job here. The Isle means security and stature. It's a good job for someone like me.

And then there's my boss. Lim is insecure and has a huge stature. Bad news for someone like me.

And then there's the patients. Dozens. All getting better because of Axcentric's work here. I've seen the effect one day can make.

"Lim. Remember last night? That guy with the pinstripes? I want you to think of him as your boss's boss's boss's boss. Remember what I told you about how he works for Axcentric Systems, and The Isle is like one-third Axcentric? Well, it's Axcentric who now owns the 99th and 100th, and believe me, if they can do that, they could give a shit about your workflow and the end-of-week security audit and data backups back at the desk. Who cares if there's a gap in the logs—these guys can flip the fucking *turbines* off. Or just transfer you down there to hump it with the morlocks who run that thing. I'm looking out for you. I swear I am. Take the day, go supplement the teams below the 99th, do anything as long as you find a way to let this go. You will not work here if you don't."

A much longer silent beat in which Lim considers *his* options.

"You have a mouth."

He walks away in pursuit of something to put in his, mentioning dinner, the lower level, the reason he came in early anyway. I remind him to avoid the gyro as he walks away, and a few minutes later, long after Lim has waddled around the corner, I hear a chuckle. In my ears, like he's still standing next to me, Christian.

We're still paired up.

"That you?" I ask.

"Yeah. I heard the whole thing."

"Are you back up here?"

"No, not really. I never unpaired, just kept my unit muted. To keep tabs on your first day."

"Didn't know you could do that."

"You never asked."

He chuckles again.

"You worried about my boss?"

"No. You did well. Insulated us. I'm heading back up, can you meet me in 104?"

Christian enters the room and immediately makes his rounds, another left to right rotation through each patient's sim-progression, their basic vitals. He visits paperback guy, deer eyes, all of them.

While wrapping up, he begins to explain that Axcentric is growing. This is an exploratory new division, but it could blossom into many more. Enhancements instead of treatments. Preventative technologies. Ways to improve memory instead of recondition it. Maybe even militaristic applications one day. "Things like that," he says distractedly.

It isn't a sales pitch so much as it is a forecast.

Christian hangs both coats—lab and pinstriped—and unbuttons the top of his shirt on the walk to 104's in-room dining partition. "Obviously this whole thing on the 99th and 100th is off-books. Axcentric investors, friends of the board. Major favors pulled, but with a major upside to the company. It's why it was just me and my partner, and why we've been a little bit secret-

ops up here. These two top floors are pretty broken in due to celebs and politicians that love the Isle, so they were the easiest to compartmentalize and keep off the company books. Your familiarity here was helpful."

He reaches into the room's pantry for a couple of beers. My stomach growls its approval. I realize I haven't eaten since this morning's breakfast.

"Pils or stout?"

I choose the heavier stout.

Christian drops my bottle on the instant-cooler first. The dark brown glass clouds and frosts as its temperature drops precipitously. He hands over the beer, offering a toast.

"To your work today, Gurmit."

"Thanks."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a patient start whimpering. Christian winces like he heard it, adjusting his earplugs' fit.

"Know we have to get back to it here," he says. "My partner just confirmed he's inbound, so I think I can manage both floors for an hour until he arrives. But if you want to stay, you're welcome to."

I think of life working with Lim. Nights spent watching JJ before a breakfast berating back home.

Christian puts down his beer. "None of this was a test, but if you want it to be, I think you passed it."

"How so?" I ask.

"My perceptions are that your work here at The Isle has

given you valuable experience dealing with a wide array of clients with high expectations. You're also a fast learner. The last 24 hours have proven that you're someone who is nimble enough to roll with the unexpected. Most importantly, you have incredible touch with the patients. You tackle well, but talk even better."

"I might blush," I say with a sip.

"Most importantly, I trust you."

For what feels like the hundredth time, I have to keep up with Christian as he walks quickly into the second of the two adjoining bedrooms in 104. It's the only empty gurney I've seen since arriving.

He motions for me to lie down.

"I don't have PTSD."

"I know. I'm not offering treatment. I'm offering a job interview." He nods next to the bed, where the usual pairing of VR goggles and a meds apparatus has been swapped for three large displays and a metal helmet tiled in thousands of tiny transmitters. "That ugly piece of headgear over there is a prototype simulator. I know this thing looks a bit remedial—the structural engineers haven't polished it yet—but it's out of beta, and totally complete from software, output, and algorithmic perspectives. Output's squeaky clean."

Christian turns the helmet over in his hands with pride. "Internal staffing interviews kick off in much the same way our patients' treatment did. Just like we download the basic architecture and performance of a brain with PTSD, we can map some of the

basic building blocks of your own workplace identity to establish a cultural and behavioral fit. Years from now, we can even use it in a predictive capacity. Think of this thing as a cartographer. It creates your neurological map."

"Then what?"

"We run simulations to see what job a candidate is the most ideal fit for."

"What if there are none?"

"I could always use a professional tackler."

We laugh, Christian setting up afterwards while I sip at the rest of my beer.

A few minutes later, I find myself in the gurney. I can feel the transmitters' hum as they hug my hairline, absorbing who I am, how I operate, what I am and what I might be.

"We'll process this by taking you through a series of memory recalls, aptitude questions, hypothetical scenarios. Then some simple reaction-speed stuff."

"Okay."

"Think about a time when you felt like you were set up for success," Christian says, "we'll start there."

I think back almost two years, my first day in The Isle with Lim as he waddled me through the Lofts, pointing out hallway access points, breakaway rooms, geotag dead-zones. Two years on a job that pays few bills but checks my parents' box—that gave me this tired reflection I wake to, day after tedious day. Then I think back to earlier—Christian walking me through the sim progressions,

showing me how to work the apparatuses. The impact I've already made easing and erasing so much pain.

He appears satisfied with the output. "Great. Now think about a time when you felt cornered or helpless."

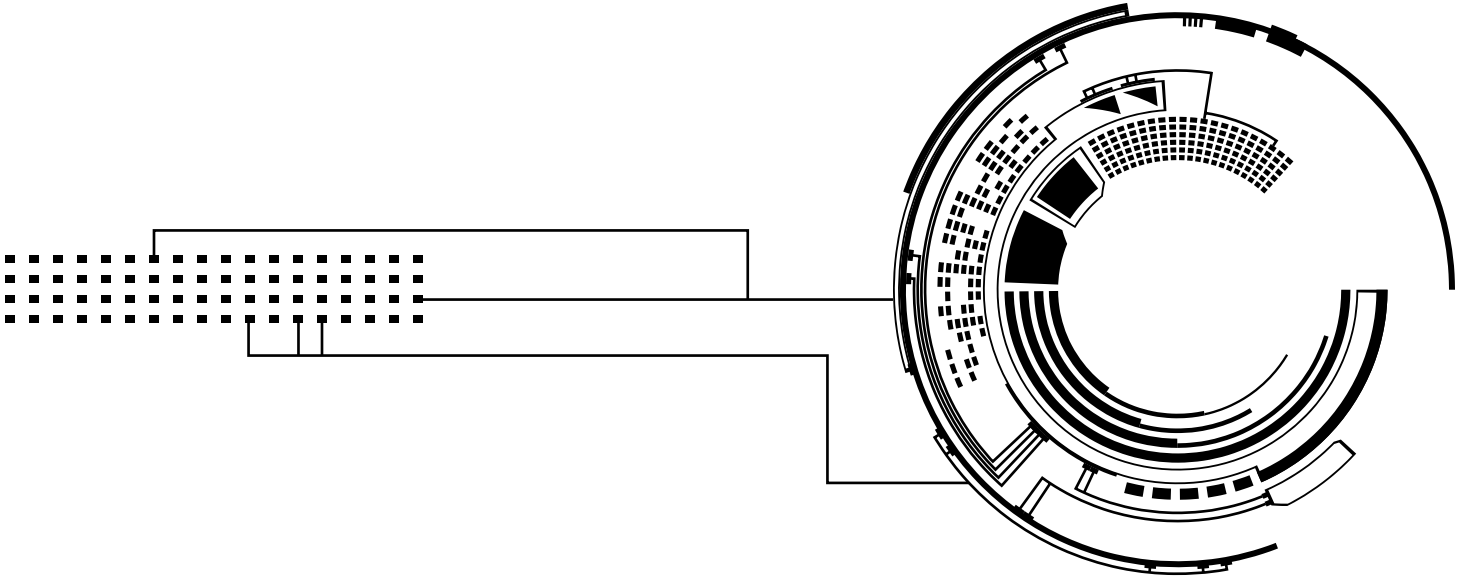
It's difficult to mute father's voice in my head—that we're an island country, isolated not only from nations racing to arm themselves, but using us in order to do so. I think back to the monorail to work—flying through neighborhoods instead of dropping into them—and my typical day here, in the Lofts: walking past guests who won't ever remember me, only the times they had here. A black performance polo unrecognizable from any other shadow. A job, not a career.

"Think about your happiest moment."

It takes me a second to snap out of it—to forget the calm, quiet moment outside, splashed in warm sunlight in Los Angeles, for the one inside, this morning, with the ones who love me most.

One after another, Christian reads off the rest of his questionnaire.

I'm pretty sure I get the rest right.



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BASTIEN_2063

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::SUMMARY//:BASTIEN'S FRONTAL LOBE ACTIVE AS HE ANALYZES WHETHER OR NOT HE CAN TRUST NIKLAS. PROCESS AND END-RESULT ACCURATELY RESEMBLES BASELINE.

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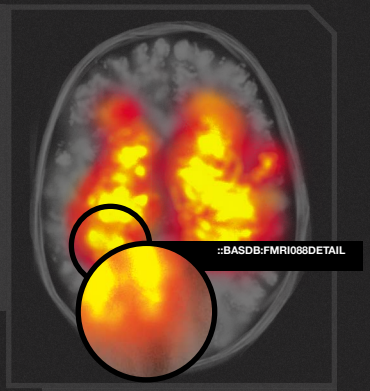

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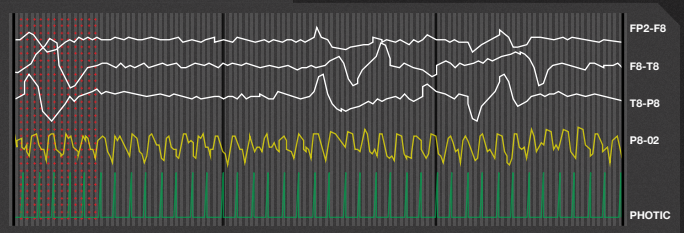

::RECORDEDASSET//:04631

::SUMMARY//:BASTIEN'S EEG SLOWS DUE TO SENSORY DEPREVATION. REACTION TO SOUNDPROOFED SUB-BASEMENT MATCHES BASELINE, FURTHER CONFIRMING CANDICACY.

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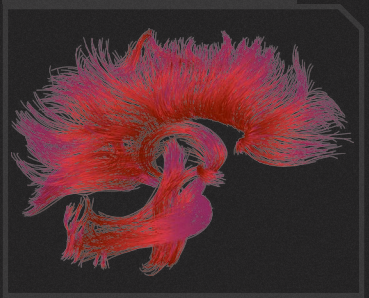

::SUMMARY//:BASTIEN'S FIGHT OR FLIGHT RESPONSE, DECISION MATRIX, REACTION SPEED, AND CORTEX VOLUMES AND CONNECTIONS ACTIVATED ALL A MATCH TO BASELINE CRITERIA. DATA ACQUIRED AS CANDIDATE EVALUATES NIKLAS AND AXION FACILITY.

Info Processing	98
Reaction Speed	96
Integrity	99
Practicality	96
Regulatory vs.	97
Exploratory	99
Reliability	98
Emotional Masking	99
Loyalty	99
COMPOSITE MATCH	98.6

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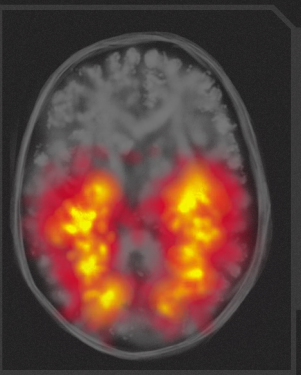
GURMIT_2037



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::SUMMARY//:GURMIT'S FRONTAL LOBE MIMICS CANDIDATE IN SIMILAR SOCIAL SITUATION. BASELINE ACQUIRED AS LIM ARRIVES ON SCENE SKEPTICALLY.

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>>GENERATING:GENERAL.DIFFUSION.FIBERS...

>>SECURE.STORAGE//:CONNECTED

>>TRANSMITTING//:ANALYSIS:\\40.3%

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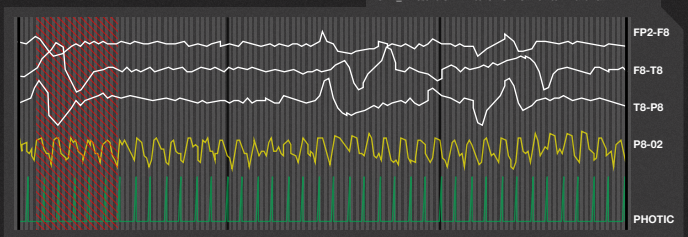

::RECORDEDASSET//:08842

::SUMMARY//:GURMIT'S EEG CONFIRMS AWARENESS LEVELS TAPER OFF SIMILARLY TO CANDIDATE. BASELINE ACQUIRED FROM SYNTHESIS OF DELTAS FROM EARPLUG SOUND-DAMPENING AND ALCOHOL ABSORPTION.

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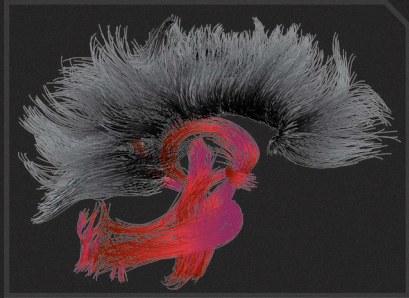

::SUMMARY//:GURMIT'S BASELINE CONFIRMS CANDIDATE MATCH. ACTIVATED CORTEX VOLUMES AND CONNECTIONS CONFIRM SIMILAR THOUGHT MATRICES. BASELINE FOR SIMULATION ACQUIRED FROM LIM'S ARRIVAL AND SUBSEQUENT DISMISSAL OUTSIDE ROOM 120.

Info Processing	97
Reaction Speed	98
Integrity	100
Practicality	96
Regulatory vs.	99
Exploratory	100
Reliability	99
Emotional Masking	100
Loyalty	100
COMPOSITE MATCH	98.6

::GURMIT_2037DB//:BACKUP:INITIALIZING..
6
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ZURICH

The dry run is over.

Coalescence Corporation's new Zurich headquarters did it: *One* survived Day 1.

Forget the first-day frustrations of executives lost in a labyrinth of new hallways, the double-booked conference rooms ruining agendas, the one quantum-dot bug that briefly turned a restroom's window transparent, and focus on what's most important—the mini-D.E.A.D. on the roof never fired, our fleet of drones returned to their hangars to charge, and even the encampment of exos enjoyed a happy hour beverage or five. Forget the rest of the dysfunctional world—at least for one building in Zurich, the day was calm.

Up in the War Room, my new colleagues in CommAffairs might disagree. It was danger-hot all day long.

While some fought editorial teams in three burgeoning black-markets, vowing to pull media spends, others debriefed a fresh-faced new lobbyist, here to help us fight the new fractional distillation legislation. Outside of *One,* we deployed social bots to vote down and discourage the random i-reports around the march on HQ, and also what happened at Niklas's shop. The fun thing about those social bots is they aren't real—they're carefully built algorithms built on authenticated-slang that pretend to doubt the validity of a story's facts with just enough trollish cynicism, or maybe claim loyalty to the company regardless of what happened, just never *too* positively to create suspicion. They are our secret weapon—our retainer'd phantoms in the crowd.

Very different from what I see, arriving back at *One*, which is a *real* one.

The original march of hundreds is down to around fifty people. Some hold hands; others raise fists. I hear the word "truth" from about a block away.

I check my mobile for any warnings but the last alert was two hours ago. Security says to go ahead and enter through the front, business as usual.

I approach from behind the group of protestors, flashing my IR-badge in case geotagging is down. One of the last exo'd guards spots it and motions for me to go around the crowd control barrier, erected to ensure the larger mob from earlier doesn't go up

the ramp or near the building. He gives me a nod as I pass the last of the crowd—three teens in leather jackets chanting for “FRAUD AUG JUSTICE.” One of the teens, a baby-faced girl in a bright pink beanie, jogs past me, tapping my shoulder.

“Hey!”

I shouldn’t pause but I do.

“You work here?”

The soldier in the exo swings something very high caliber in our direction. I nod him off.

“It’s my first day,” I say to the girl.

“Thank god!” she says, hands on her head in relief. “My cousin was the lung-boost victim, the one who died yesterday. Nobody’s telling us anything!”

I know ComAffairs has waited to make a public statement until I get back. The delay has been bad for business but necessary, as Julien and I know now that I can’t exactly shoot over updates in case a channel gets subpoenaed. This’ll have to happen like it did with Niklas—soundproofed and off the record. I suspect that east-bank elevator is waiting.

The girl in the beanie wipes her nose. “He was the best kid. Healthier than I am. He thought all of Singapore was a scam. He would’ve never went in for a lung boost.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I hear myself say.

“There’s something you guys aren’t telling us. We just want to know what happened.”

“Everyone at Coalescence offers you our most sincere

condolences,” I hear myself say.

“Please. Our family just wants some closure.”

“We can’t offer any other statement at this time,” I hear myself say robotically, feeling no more human than the social bots deployed online, or an extension of the team up in the War Room, or an active-sim going through the motions, designed in some Axcentric sub-basement to execute the most efficient, high-utility decision.

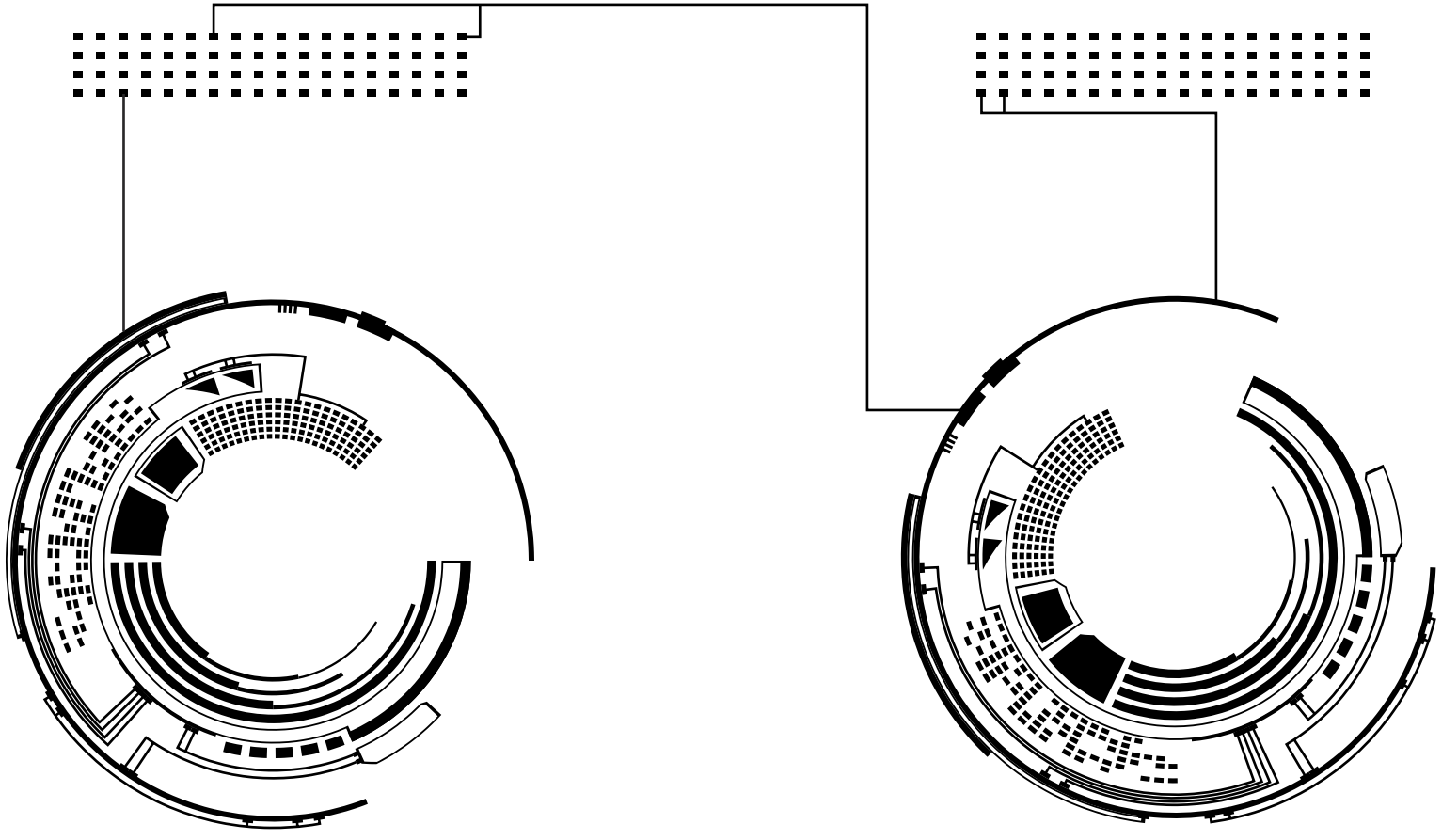
There’s a moment where all I see is pain in her eyes. It sticks with me for a second as I watch the back of her head as she walks away. In that moment, I see my future upstairs—real, quantifiable impact on an ever-changing world from the city it looks up to most. A job I was probably born to do.

But then I see something else. A new thought pierces the numb, muted soundproofing that has been this day, this whole life, and from somewhere far away, somewhere I don’t even recognize, I see myself go after her.

I ask her to wait.

OPTION_1// BREAK_PROTOCOL

OPTION_2// REPORT_TO_VÄST



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BASTIEN_2063

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GURMIT_2037

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- ARCHIVAL_SIM
- COMPATIBILITY_MATRIX

COMPATIBILITY_RESULTS
- RESULT_CODE
- RESULT_DESCRIPTION

TIMEPERIODS
- 2037_ID
- 2063_ID

COMPATIBILITY_VARIABLEMATRIX
- VARIABLE_ID
- REACTIONTIME_SIM
- EMPATH_SIM
- EXTRO_SIM
- INTRO_SIM
- SENSE_SIM
- INTUIT_SIM
- THINK_SIM
- FEEL_SIM
- JUDGE_SIM
- PERCEIVE_SIM

COMPLETE

SIMULATION_ELEMENTS
- PLACE_SIM
- FACE_SIM
- OPTIC_SIM
- COCHLEAR_SIM
- OLFACTORY_SIM
- GUSTATORY_SIM
- MEMORY_SIM
- ITEMS_SIM
- TACTILE_SIM

SIMSTREAM
- SIMSTREAM_ID
- NAME
- EMPOLOYEE_ID
- SIZE_BYTES
- DESCRIPTION
- USER_FORMAT_DESCRPTION
- SOURCE
- INTERNAL_ID
- DELETED
- STORE_NUMBER

SIM2SIM
- ID
- CANDIDATE_COMM_ID
- PRECEDING_COMM_ID

CC_HR
- OFFICE_ID
- NAME
- DEPT
- SALARY
- EXPERIENCE
- EDUCATION
- MANAGER

SIMMETADATAREGISTRY
- SIM_METADATA_ID
- CATEGORY
- SUBTEXT_QUALIFIER
- SECONDARY_QUALIFIER

SIMULATION_BASTIEN_VISUALS
ROME
TOGAS
BODYLIGHT
SINGAPORE_INCIDENT
ETRAM
AUGS_VARIOUS
DRONES_VARIOUS
AXION_LOGOASSET
98.8%

SIMULATION_BASTIEN_LOCATIONS
TURICUM
ZURICH
INDUSTRIEQUARTIER
HARDBRÜCKE
ONE
WAR_ROOM
AX_SUB_BASEMENT_1
98.8%

SIMULATION_BASTIEN_PEOPLE
MITZI
WAITRESS1
TURICUM_PATRONS_1-459
JULIEN
COMMAFFAIRS_TEAM_2-8
VÁST
NIKLAS
LUNG_BOOST_VICTIM
MARCHERS_1-53
98.8%

SIMULATION_BASTIEN_SOUND
TURICUM
SOUNDPROOF1_MEMBRANE
SOUNDPROOF2_FIELD
WAR_ROOM-FILES-1-4
98.8%

SIMULATION_BASTIEN_SCENT
TURICUM-INTERIOR
LAVENDER
NEW_NILE-ARABICA
ZURICH-VARIOUS
98.8%

SIMULATION_BASTIEN_ITEMS
TRAIN
FLYDRONE
GLOVE-LATEX
CC_KIT
AX_HELMET
98.8%

SIMULATION_BASTIEN_RECALLS
CC_OFFERINGS
CC_AUG-BLACKMARKET
CC_ZURICH-VARIOUS
SUPERSTORM_DAISY
98.8%

::COMPATIBILITY_SIMULATION_RENDER_COMPLETE

::CANDIDATE_MATCHING..

::SIMULATION_COMPLETE

::CANDIDATE_APPROVED

SIMULATION_GURMIT_VISUALS
V-PITCH
D.E.A.D. SYSTEM
L.A. DRONE ATTACK
98.8%

SIMULATION_GURMIT_LOCATIONS
SINGAPORE
MONORAIL
THE ISLE
THE LOFTS
104
98.8%

SIMULATION_GURMIT_PEOPLE
LIM
JJ
CHRISTIAN
MOTHER
ADNAN
SIM-PATIENTS1-13
98.8%

SIMULATION_GURMIT_SOUND
L.A. DRONE ATTACK
EGG TIMER
98.8%

SIMULATION_GURMIT_SCENT
TOAST
KAYA
98.8%

SIMULATION_GURMIT_RECALLS
KAYA_BREAKFAST
L.A. DRONE ATTACK
54_IMMORTALS
98.8%

SIMULATION_GURMIT_ITEMS
V_PITCH
EARPLUGS
VR_GOGGLES
MED_APPARATUS
RFID_TAGS
AX_HELMET
98.8%

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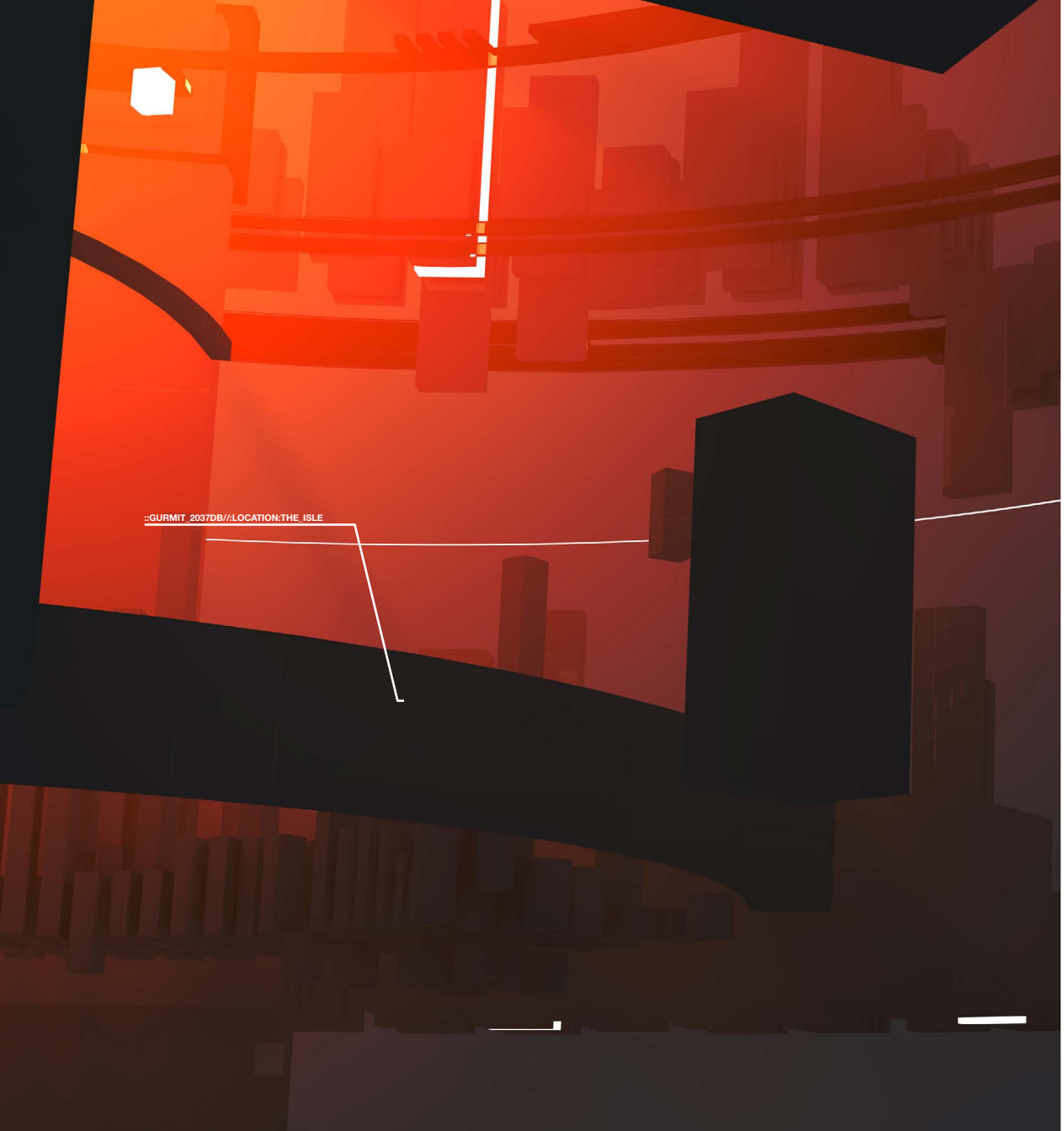

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to John Rafacz, Craig Houston, Jason Blundell, Mark Lamia, Jay Puryear, and the entire Treyarch team for introducing me to this vivid vision of the future, and especially for entrusting me with it. You made Gurmit and Bastien's journeys such rewarding ones to work on.

Huge thanks to Matt Cox, Andrew Drake, and the entire Activision Blizzard organization for helping bring this virtual simulation into the real world.

This project doesn't look the way it does without Dan Martin, who evolved the story's tech into something tangible and visually arresting. If only I could write how you design!

We didn't have an Axcentric Simulator, but many thanks to my amazing editor tandem of Brian Oliu and Matt Bell, who stepped into my brain, survived, and helped make every single sentence better.

And many, many thanks to Dr. Baxter Allen, whose expertise on all things neurological ensured the fiction here was always firmly rooted in the real advances happening today. The theories and research you shared boggled the mind, even as we virtually simulated one.

Most importantly, thank you to every Call of Duty fan, online and off. This franchise is a family and your passion always feeds my own. See you online.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Rudin is the best-selling author of RIGHTFUL KING, a prequel narrative for Call of Duty: Black Ops 2 recognized at the International Academy of the Visual Arts, Game Marketing Awards, and Game Developers Conference.

Michael is also the author of DEVIL'S BREATH, the prequel narrative for Call of Duty: Ghosts. He is a recipient of a Hopwood Award for the Novel from the University of Michigan.

His fiction has appeared in The Collagist and Nanoism, and has been published in five languages. Essays and non-fiction have appeared or are forthcoming in The Huffington Post, the textbook Creative Composition, The Journal of Electronic Publishing, and Fiction Writers Review, where he lends a hand directing development.

What time he has left, he invests in the 13 lb. pup he found trolling the streets of Los Angeles. It's probably the most rewarding thing he does.

Say hello via Twitter @mikerudin or www.mikerudin.com.

Design, layout, and cover by Dan Martin.
Edited by Brian Oliu and Matt Bell.

Produced by Armed Mind.

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